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# anti trafficking review

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## Special Issue—Trafficking Representations

**Editorial:** Trafficking (in) Representations: Understanding the recurring appeal of victimhood and slavery in neoliberal times

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My Experience is Mine to Tell: Challenging the abolitionist victimhood framework

How to Stage a Raid: Police, media and the master narrative of trafficking

Neoliberal Sexual Humanitarianism and Story-Telling: The case of Somaly Mam

Expelling Slavery from the Nation: Representations of labour exploitation in Australia's supply chain

'It's All in Their Brain': Constructing the figure of the trafficking victim on the US-Mexico border

Looking Beyond 'White Slavery': Trafficking, the Jewish Association, and the dangerous politics of migration control in England, 1890-1910

Captured 'Realities' of Human Trafficking: Analysis of photographs illustrating stories on trafficking into the sex industry in Serbian media

### Rebooting Trafficking

The Art of the Possible: Making films on sex work migration and human trafficking

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# ANTI-TRAFFICKING REVIEW

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Special Issue

TRAFFICKING REPRESENTATIONS

Issue 7   September 2016

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The *Anti-Trafficking Review* (ISSN 2286-7511) is published by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), a network of over 80 NGOs worldwide focused on advancing the human rights of migrants and trafficked persons.

The *Anti-Trafficking Review* promotes a human rights-based approach to anti-trafficking. It explores trafficking in its broader context including gender analyses and intersections with labour and migrant rights. It offers an outlet and space for dialogue between academics, practitioners, trafficked persons and advocates seeking to communicate new ideas and findings to those working for and with trafficked persons.

The *Review* is primarily an e-journal, published biannually. The journal presents rigorously considered, peer-reviewed material in clear English. Each issue relates to an emerging or overlooked theme in the field of anti-trafficking.

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# Editorial: Trafficking (in) Representations: Understanding the recurring appeal of victimhood and slavery in neoliberal times

*Rutvica Andrijasevic and Nicola Mai*

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Representations of trafficking and forced labour are pervasive within media, policymaking, and humanitarian debates, discourses and interventions. The terms exploitation and trafficking are increasingly used to characterise the work that migrants do in the sex industry and other irregular employment sectors. Of late, the notion of 'modern slavery' is on show in campaigns aiming to raise awareness about trafficking and funds for anti-trafficking initiatives among corporations and local enterprises as well as the general public. Celebrity interventions, militant documentaries, artistic works and fiction films have all become powerful vectors of the global distribution of the trafficking and 'modern slavery' rhetoric. These offer simplistic solutions to complex issues without challenging the structural and causal factors of inequality. Through fictional and narrow representations of ideal victims they tend to entrench racialised narratives and conflate all sex work with trafficking, which legitimates criminalising policies and interventions exacerbating the social vulnerability of sex workers. It is because of the under-researched role of representation in the development of anti-trafficking policies and initiatives that the *Anti-Trafficking Review* decided to devote a thematic issue on trafficking representations.

As humanitarian scripts and images saturate the representation of contemporary societies, the complex social and economic trajectories of migrants working in low-wage sectors, such as agriculture, domestic work and the sex industry, tend to be framed according to specific narratives of

suffering and abuse. In the process, the diversity of people's migration and work experiences is simplified and reduced to a scenario of endemic trafficking and exploitation. This process of reduction and simplification of migrant lives and labouring subjectivities in public debates and media representations should be seen as part and parcel of the deep social transformations brought about by the globalisation of neoliberal ideologies and policies from the global North.

Our times are characterised by the reframing of social life according to the logic of profit, the contraction of collective forms of solidarity, the withdrawal of the state and, particularly in the global North, the dismantling of the welfare state. They are also characterised by a humanitarian representation of the growing inequality within and among societies in terms of the opposition between a supposedly unified 'humanity' and individual victims to be cared for.<sup>1</sup> In contemporary and highly mediatised times the visual representation of social phenomena in fictional films, humanitarian campaigns and documentaries plays an increasingly crucial role in setting the 'primary definitions' according to which these are subsequently understood and addressed.<sup>2</sup> Humanitarian representations tend to frame victims as 'exceptions' rather than 'products' of the globalisation of neoliberal politics and to locate these victims outside of a supposedly shared humanity that actually expresses the privileges and moralities of the global North. In doing so, humanitarian representations legitimise and produce interventions 'containing' poor countries and the migration of their underprivileged and 'undesirable' citizens.<sup>3</sup>

The deepening of inequality, proliferation of conflicts and trends towards individualised and consumerist lifestyles under neoliberalism produce new experiences of exploitation and agency in relation to migrant work, especially in the sex industry. By migrating and working in the global sex industry, people try to cope with the increased precariousness and exploitability they encounter at home. Young adults also negotiate their aspiration to individualised, consumerist and hedonistic late modern lifestyles against the prevalence of conservative gender values and sexual

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<sup>1</sup> J Rancière, 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 103, no. 2/3, 2004, pp. 297–310.

<sup>2</sup> S Hall, C Critcher, T Jefferson, J Clarke and B Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order*, Macmillan Press, London, 2008, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> M Agier, *Managing the Undesirables*, Polity Press, Oxford, 2011.

mores at home.<sup>4</sup> Having access to a different material world by migrating and selling sex allows them to be the kind of woman or man they want to be, and this is a priority that shapes their understandings of agency and exploitation.

Simplistic trafficking and slavery representations portraying all migrant sex workers as powerless victims are problematic because they conceal the agency of the migrants working in the sex industry. This hides the actuality of migratory projects and the fact that sex work is, for most migrant women, men and transgender people, an income generating activity and an opportunity to achieve social mobility.<sup>5</sup> Moral panics about 'sex slaves' also hide the reality that only a minority of migrants working in the sex industry is actually trafficked or forced.<sup>6</sup> Tougher actions to combat trafficking, developed on the wave of a public outcry against sexual slavery, result in more stringent anti-immigration measures and shift migration towards irregular channels managed by third parties and agencies. This makes migrants dependent on third parties' organising of cross-border travel, gives third parties greater control over the costs, terms and routes of travel, and leaves ample space for abuse and profiteering from low wage and irregular work.<sup>7</sup>

By criminalising low wage and irregular work as individual and spectacular cases of trafficking, simplistic trafficking representations play a key role in legitimising rescue operations involving criminalisation, detention and arrest of both non-trafficked and trafficked persons.<sup>8</sup> The process through

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<sup>4</sup> D Brennan, *What's Love Got to Do with It? Transnational desires and sex tourism in the Dominican Republic*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2004; S Cheng, *On the Move for Love. Migrant entertainers and the U.S. military in South Korea*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> N Mai, 'Embodied Cosmopolitanisms: The subjective mobility of migrants working in the global sex industry', *Gender, Place and Culture*, vol. 20, issue 1, 2013, pp. 107–124.

<sup>6</sup> N Mai, *Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry—Final policy-relevant report*, ISET (Institute for the Study of European Transformations), London Metropolitan University, 2009, retrieved 26 August 2016, <http://www.researchcatalogue.esrc.ac.uk/grants/RES-062-23-0137/read>

<sup>7</sup> R Andrijasevic, *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2010; M Ribeiro and O Sacramento, 'Violence against Prostitutes: Findings of research in the Spanish-Portuguese frontier region', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 12, issue 1, 2005, pp. 61–81; J Salt, 'Trafficking and Human Smuggling: A European perspective', *International Migration*, vol. 38, issue 3, 2000, pp. 31–56.

<sup>8</sup> B Anderson and J O'Connell Davidson, *Is Trafficking in Human Beings Demand Driven? A multi-country pilot study*, International Organization for Migration, Geneva, 2003.

which groups of migrants are represented as vulnerable to trafficking in relation to their involvement in sex work and intervened upon by local, national and international institutions and NGOs is best understood in terms of ‘sexual humanitarianism’.<sup>9</sup> As a result of this process and in order to have their rights recognised, as well as avoid incarceration and deportation, migrants, especially those selling sex, need to (re)present their biographies and experiences according to humanitarian definitions of exploitation, stereotypical notions of victimhood and normative sex-gender categorisations.

What we are seeing therefore is a persistence of the figure of the trafficking victim. Despite decades of research and activism that put forward a convincing critique of the passive and enslaved trafficking victim and replaced her with the figures of the active migrant, worker and political protagonist,<sup>10</sup> the trafficking victim continues to dominate public and policy debates. The stereotypical image of the victim is of a young, innocent, foreign woman tricked into prostitution abroad. She is battered and kept under continuous surveillance so that her only hope is police rescue. Articles featured in this volume explore the cultural codes upon which the narratives of trafficking, slavery and victimhood rest and the reasons why they continue to retain their discursive power. They do so by addressing stereotypical trafficking representations in terms of ‘sexual stories’, as cultural scripts that are taken as signs of truth and presented to us as facts at specific historical junctures.<sup>11</sup> Stereotypes need to be understood as a form of powerful aesthetic and social constructs that condense complex connotations into fixed images and recurring narratives.<sup>12</sup>

Due to their fixity and recurrence, stereotypes also operate as myths, namely as narratives that provide communities with a collective identity. Such collective identities are consolidated through rituals, liturgies and

<sup>9</sup> N Mai, ‘Assembling Samira: Understanding sexual humanitarianism through experimental filmmaking,’ *antiAtlas Journal*, vol. 1, 2016, retrieved 21 August 2016, <http://www.antiatlas-journal.net/01-assembling-samira-understanding-sexual-humanitarianism-throughexperimental-filmmaking>

<sup>10</sup> R Andrijasevic, C Aradau, J Huysmans, et al., ‘European Citizenship Unbound: Sex work, mobility, mobilisation’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 30, issue 3, 2012, pp. 497–514; S Shah, *Street Corner Secrets*, Duke University Press, Raleigh, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> K Plummer, ‘Telling Sexual Stories in a Late Modern World’, *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 18, 2005, pp. 101–120.

<sup>12</sup> R Dyer, *The Matter of Images. Essays on Representation*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993.

symbols that are constantly reproduced through their repetition.<sup>13</sup> The mythological function of the trafficking narrative and the victim figure are most visible in the fact that the trafficking plot never varies: it starts with deception, which is followed by coercion into prostitution, moves on to the tragedy of (sexual) slavery and finally finds resolution through the rescue of the victim by the police or an NGO.<sup>14</sup> Representations that depict women as kidnapped from their homes, coerced into migration and then imprisoned in brothels create a false dichotomy between ‘ideal’ and real victims,<sup>15</sup> exclude those women who do not fit the narrow definition of the ideal victim<sup>16</sup> and mark the boundary between citizens and non-citizens.<sup>17</sup> Studies of media coverage, for example in Norway, have pointed to the objectification and sexualisation of Nigerian women working in the sex sector<sup>18</sup> and those of the stripping industry in the USA have exposed the hypersexualisation of the Black and Latina women and the racialised dimension of the discursive construction of sex work.<sup>19</sup> Representation is therefore key to understanding the historical, cultural and political specificity of the figure of the victim. Given the global resonance of trafficking sexual stories and of the embedded figure of the victim in humanitarian representations, it is of utmost importance to investigate the significance of their recurrence in different and specific geographical and historical settings. In this respect trafficking representations should not be seen as ‘free-floating’ but rather as embedded within narrative tropes and discursive constructions about gender, sexuality, race and class that are culturally, geopolitically and historically specific.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> G Shöpfli, ‘The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myth’, in G Hosking and G Shöpfli (eds.), *Myths and Nationhood*, Hurst, London, 1997, pp. 19–35.

<sup>14</sup> J Doezeema, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters: The construction of trafficking*, Zed Books, London, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> C Hoyle, M Bosworth and M Dempsey, ‘Labelling the Victims of Sex Trafficking: Exploring the borderland between rhetoric and reality’, *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2011, pp. 313–329.

<sup>16</sup> E O’Brien, ‘Ideal Victims in Trafficking Awareness Campaigns’, in K Carrington, M Ball, E O’Brien and J Tauri (eds.), *Crime, Justice and Social Democracy: International perspectives*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2013, pp. 315–325.

<sup>17</sup> R Andrijasevic, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, 2007, vol. 86, pp. 24–44.

<sup>18</sup> S Jahnsen, *Women who Cross Borders—Black magic? A critical discourse analysis of the Norwegian newspaper coverage*, Masters thesis, Department of Sociology, The University of Bergen, Bergen, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> S Brooks, ‘Hypersexualization and the Dark Body: Race and inequality among Black and Latina women in the exotic dance industry’, *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2010, pp. 70–80.

<sup>20</sup> R Andrijasevic, ‘The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation’, in M Evans et al (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Sage, London, 2014, pp. 359–373; Grupo Davida, ‘Trafficking as a Floating Signifier: The view from Brazil’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 4, 2015, pp. 161–166.



## The Special Issue

Contributions in this issue of the *Anti-Trafficking Review* explore the specific visual material and narratives, both past and present, through which representations of trafficking and slavery are constructed and reproduced in film, TV, newspapers and public discourse. The articles examine such images and narratives in Australia, Cambodia, Nigeria, Serbia, Denmark, the UK, and the USA and discuss the appeal held by popular representations of trafficking and the victim of trafficking. Contributors investigate how trafficking representations operate in different historical, geopolitical and social contexts.

Claudia Cojocaru, Annie Hill and Heidi Hoefinger examine and challenge the construction of the victimhood narrative in the USA, the UK, and Cambodia respectively. In her contribution, Claudia Cojocaru adopts an analytical auto-ethnographic approach to discuss an art exhibit on trafficking into the sex industry in New York City in 2015. Drawing on her personal experiences as a formerly trafficked individual, as well as those of the women she worked with, Cojocaru challenges the abolitionist movement's framing both of women trafficked in the sex industry and of voluntary sex workers. She also argues that the 'secondary exploitation' of representations of trafficked people by opportunistic actors further endangers women who are already stigmatised and marginalised. Annie Hill analyses the news representation of a UK police raid on a massage parlour called Cuddles in 2005 and argues that the police and the media participated in discriminatory practices by circulating a master narrative of trafficking and generating publicity that harmed the women who were supposed to need rescuing. Hill examines details of the raid and its aftermath that were obscured by the official account. By analysing data on migrant women and sex workers' experiences of raids and offering an alternative reading of the circulated raid photographs, she argues that the rights of women targeted in raids were disregarded and the harms they experienced dismissed in order to amplify the state's anti-trafficking agenda. Heidi Hoefinger also explores the issue of trafficking representations as potentially exploitative of trafficked people's experiences by referring to the controversial case of Somaly Mam—the self-declared 'sex slave' turned 'modern-day hero'. Hoefinger's contribution analyses Mam's prolific trajectory of self-representation along tropes of sexual humanitarianism and argues that these narratives helped to set in motion one of the most lucrative and, in many ways, most exploitative and problematic anti-trafficking endeavours in Cambodia to date.

The ways in which the victim of trafficking stereotype operates so as to separate social groups and populations both within as well as between nations is a recurring topic in this volume. Contributions by Anna Szörényi and Gabriella Sanchez show how notions of trafficking, victimhood, and slavery are deployed in order to establish borders of belonging and citizenship. Anna Szörényi discusses an Australian TV programme titled 'Slaving Away' that revealed the ongoing labour exploitation in the food industry of migrant workers on working holiday visas. This situation, first referred to as an instance of worker exploitation, soon became a matter of visa violations and hence arrest of 'illegal workers'. Szörényi argues that this representational shift is enabled by cultural amnesia over Australia's history of exploitation of racialised and migrant labourers, which she sees as allowing 'slavery' to be represented as a 'foreign' problem that can be expelled from the body of the nation in defence of the purity of the national domestic space. In a similar way Gabriella Sanchez's contribution shows that the representation of human trafficking at the US-Mexico border not only confirms ethnic stereotypes of Mexican women as foreign and underdeveloped, but also reproduces long-standing identity and geopolitical tensions in a border community with a history of segregation, poverty and inequality. Drawing from observations of human trafficking awareness trainings and from interviews and interactions with human trafficking victim advocates, Sanchez analyses how references to victims' Mexican origin reinforce social and ethnic difference despite the continuities connecting communities on both sides of the US-Mexico divide.

At the same time, this special issue examines the ways in which mainstream trafficking and 'modern slavery' representations hinder a better understanding of how the socio-economic and political inequalities framing labour exploitation are produced and maintained in various locations and at different historical settings. Articles by Rachael Attwood and Elena Krsmanovic address these topics in relation to England at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary Serbia, respectively. Attwood's contribution seeks to revise Jo Doezeema's suggestion that 'the white slave' was the only dominant representation of 'the trafficked woman' used by early anti-trafficking advocates in Europe and the United States. She explores the way in which the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women (JAPGW), one of the pillars of England's early anti-trafficking movement, represented the female Jewish migrants it deemed at risk of being trafficked into sex work between 1890 and 1910. Attwood argues that the JAPGW stigmatised these women by placing, in a paradoxically anti-Semitic way, most of the blame for trafficking upon them and by positioning them to a greater or a lesser

extent as ‘undesirable and undeserving working-class foreigners’ who could never become respectable English women. Krsmanovic’s contribution analyses representations of people trafficked into the sex industry in photographs accompanying articles published in Serbian online media from 2011 to 2014. Her analysis shows that portrayals of trafficked persons fit into two dominant frames: powerless victim or unworthy prostitute. Her article suggests that these images tell us more about societal fear of insecurity, ideas about gender, erotic obsessions and morality than about the phenomenon of human trafficking itself. It also argues that the meaning of trafficking is shaped by the deeply embedded codes of patriarchy and misogyny and the racialised hierarchies present in Serbian society.

As the contributions to this issue show, current sexual humanitarian times are characterised by the emergence of a representation regime and filmmaking genres that are deeply implicated in the global circulation and validation of trafficking stereotypes and myths by conflating fictional accounts with deliberately misconstrued evidence. This dynamic results in a new genre, that of ‘melomentary’, which frames empirical evidence on ‘sex trafficking’ according to a strategically predetermined plot line and to subject positions that reify women as innocent victims and men as evil villains.<sup>21</sup> The rise of this genre urged critical filmmaking responses so as to challenge the voyeurism, ethics and the criteria of authenticity characterising sexual humanitarian melomentaries.<sup>22</sup>

In this volume two contributors address the issue of how to represent trafficking differently from existing tropes, stereotypes and genres in different but interlinked respects. Nicholas de Villiers deploys feminist psychoanalytic film theory and theories of affect to make sense of the appeal of sensational exposés like Lifetime Television’s *Human Trafficking*

<sup>21</sup> C S Vance, ‘Innocence and Experience: Melodramatic narratives of sex trafficking and their consequences for law and policy’, *History of the Present*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2012, pp. 200–218.

<sup>22</sup> See films by Nicola Mai *Normal* (2012), *Samira* (2013) and *Travel* (2016). In his films Nick Mai used actors and naturalistic aesthetics to represent real interview transcripts and ethnographic situations emerging from original research on migrant sex workers. By both creating and interrupting a suspension of disbelief through the adoption of a hybrid fiction/documentary method Mai’s films aim to both reproduce and challenge the affective appeal and performative dimensions characterising sexual humanitarian melomentaries. The trailers of Nick Mai’s films are available at: <https://vimeo.com/user3467382>

(2005). De Villiers also refers to film theory about the ‘rebooting’ of film franchises to explain the preponderance of similar programming, such as *Sex Slaves* (2005), *Selling the Girl Next Door* (2011) and *Trafficked* (2016), and the way contemporary discourses of human trafficking have effectively rebranded the myth of ‘white slavery’. Finally, Sine Plambeck discusses the ethical and aesthetic predicaments posed to attempts to produce non-simplistic and alternative representations of trafficking and sex work migration by the genre and production necessities of documentary filmmaking. Her article draws on two films about women migrant sex workers she produced as an anthropologist and filmmaker—*Trafficking* (2010) and *Becky’s Journey* (2014)—and reviews mainstream anti-trafficking documentaries. Plambeck argues that a one-dimensional perspective on sex work and trafficking is just one of the factors influencing the filmmaking process. She emphasises that the theoretical and practical reasons behind production decisions mean that films are often the result of compromises with what is possible in documentary filmmaking.<sup>23</sup>

Overall the articles in this issue show that trafficking representations deserve critical attention because they make the expanding complexity of social life intelligible according to the profit-accumulation mantra of neoliberalism in different and interlinked ways. They mobilise stereotypical narratives and visual constructions about sexuality, gender, class and race that end up by demarcating people’s entitlement to social mobility and citizenship in increasingly unequal times. By focusing on the spectacular and criminal exploitation of a minority of victims, they legitimise restrictive migration policies and anti-trafficking interventions containing racially and socially ‘undesirable’ groups and exacerbating migrant workers’ exposure to trafficking. Most importantly stereotypical trafficking representations conveniently distract the global public from their increasing and shared day-to-day exploitability as workers because of the systematic erosion of labour rights globally. In doing so, they become complicit in the perpetuation of the very social inequalities, hierarchies and conflicts that allow exploitation and trafficking to occur.

<sup>23</sup> Plambeck’s article was presented at the Representing Sexual Humanitarianism workshop organised by C Giametta and N Mai on 23 and 24 September 2015 at the MuCEM (Marseille). The workshop emerged from the research project *Embodied Borders (EMBORDERS)* directed by N Mai and funded by the A\*MIDEX Foundation of Aix-Marseille Université (2014-15). For more information on the workshop and the Emborders project see: <https://sexualhumanitarianism-sm.wordpress.com>

**Rutvica Andrijasevic** is an activist scholar with research interests in the areas of migrant labour, gender, national state power, and global firms. Rutvica's research on trafficking and her book '*Agency, Migration and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking*' (2010) address the link between migration, gendered subjectivity and changes in citizenship in Europe. Rutvica's current project focuses on global firms and the rise of China, and investigates the ways in which 'Chinese' modes of production and management are impacting labour relations in Europe. She works as an Associate Professor of Management at the School of Economics, Finance and Management at the University of Bristol and is a member of the editorial collective of *Feminist Review*. Email: [ra14611@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:ra14611@bristol.ac.uk)

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## **Thematic Articles: Trafficking Representations**

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# My Experience is Mine to Tell: Challenging the abolitionist victimhood framework

*Claudia Cojocaru*

## Abstract

This article is an analytical auto-ethnography of an art exhibit on trafficking into the sex industry in New York City in 2015. The analysis is informed by my own experience as a formerly trafficked person, and by other women's own interpretations of their lived realities as trafficked or as migrant workers in the Japanese sex industry. This paper challenges the abolitionist movement's unidimensional interpretation of all women engaged in sex work as victims trafficked in the sex industry; and introduces the concept of 'secondary exploitation', where these representations are framed and repackaged for consumption by opportunistic actors, while arguably further stigmatising and marginalising already vulnerable women.

**Keywords:** trafficking, sex work, auto-ethnography, secondary exploitation, abolitionist movement, United States

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From 17 February to 3 April 2015, the Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York hosted *Of Human Bondage*, an art show focused on trafficking into the sex industry. The five participating artists, who have never been trafficked, or engaged in sex work themselves, showcased photographs and mixed media works revolving around images and conceptual descriptions of sex workers as trafficked. Most importantly, the curator focused on how the artists

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explored their feelings<sup>1</sup> regarding trafficking into the sex industry in the pieces presented, and how the exhibit helped redefine prostitution as trafficking. When conceptualising the exhibit, neither the artists, nor the curator<sup>2</sup> of the show, appeared to have taken into consideration that these highly processed portrayals of sex workers did not represent the lived realities of trafficked individuals, the complexities of their experiences, how they interpret their lives, or construct their identities. Furthermore, perhaps neither the gallery nor the artists expected a formerly trafficked individual to attend the exhibition and evaluate the artwork through the lens of her own experiences and converging identities. As a formerly trafficked forced sex worker, and relying on my current position of scholar and activist, I present an alternative narrative to the dominant anti-trafficking discourse, anchored in my experiences and analysed through my interpretation of the current empirical research literature on human trafficking and sex work. Tracing the mainstream US anti-trafficking movement's construction of victimhood in trafficking and prostitution<sup>3</sup> through a symbolic and instrumental power analysis,<sup>4</sup> I seek to generate a discussion on some of the consequences the narrow, simplistic constructions of victim typologies have on women working in the sex industry. These conceptualisations of sex workers as lacking agency and needing immediate rescue damage rather than empower trafficked and voluntary sex workers alike, placing them at higher risk of structural violence and discrimination. I argue that the abolitionist conflation of voluntary sex work and trafficking has created a toxic climate of *secondary exploitation*,<sup>5</sup> in which various actors perpetuate misleading and dehumanising stereotypes, which contribute to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of sex workers and trafficked individuals.

<sup>1</sup> 'The five artists in this show Steven Cavallo, Eleni Lyra, Yiannis Christakos, Angelo Gavrias and Photini Papahatzis explore their feelings on the subject of trafficking into the sex trade. Some of their works deal directly with the subject as do Cavallo's, Gavrias' or Papahatzis' while others comment on the topic in a subtler more abstract way as do Christakos and Lyras', in 'Of Human Bondage', Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery, retrieved 6 January 2016, <https://shivagalleryjijay.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/of-human-bondage/>

<sup>2</sup> Thalia Vrachopoulos, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery, retrieved 6 January 2016, <http://shivagallery.org/portfolio/thalia-vrachopoulos/>

<sup>3</sup> Although the term 'sex work' is preferable to 'prostitution', I use them interchangeably here.

<sup>4</sup> J R Gusfield, 'Moral Passage: The symbolic process in public designations of deviance', *Social Problems*, vol. 15, issue 2, 1967, pp. 175—188.

<sup>5</sup> C Cojocar, Concept paper, currently under review.



To provide a counter-narrative grounded in scientific inquiry and critical assessment of the dominant anti-trafficking discourse while reflecting the voices silenced by the abolitionist construction of victimhood, I use a ‘multi-layered account to relate my narrative, shifting forward, backward and sideways through time, space, attitudes and culture’.<sup>6</sup> Adopting an analytical auto-ethnographic perspective,<sup>7</sup> this article addresses the way representations of trafficked individuals and voluntary sex workers are conceptualised and shaped to generate emotionally resonant frames. These frames have been successfully employed to redefine voluntary sex workers as passive victims of trafficking, and have been instrumental in empowering an elite group of moral crusaders to redefine public discourse and policy on prostitution as trafficking.

## United States Human Trafficking Law

Human trafficking was first defined in the US with the adoption of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA). Despite the anticipated high numbers of arrests and prosecutions for trafficking not materialising, as well as the expected figures of recovered trafficking victims not being as significant as law enforcement agencies and the US Congress had projected,<sup>8</sup> every TVPA reauthorisation called for (and was granted) increased resources. The TVPA reauthorisations have sanctioned expanding terminology and social and legal categories,<sup>9</sup> and justified new technologies of surveillance and intervention. The Bush administration’s financial largesse to faith-based and non-governmental organisations (FBOs and NGOs) adhering to the evangelical rhetoric of salvation, propelled the prostitution abolitionist faction of the anti-trafficking movement on a path to unprecedented prosperity and socio-political

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<sup>6</sup> C Rambo-Ronai, ‘A Night in the Life of an Erotic Dancer/Researcher: The emergent construct of the self’, in Ellis and Flatterly (eds.), *Subjectivity in Social Research: Windows on lived experience*, Sage, Newbury Park, 1992, pp. 102–124.

<sup>7</sup> L. Anderson, ‘Analytic Autoethnography’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 35, issue 4, 2006, pp. 373–395; N K Denzin, *Interpretive Interactionism*, Applied Social Research Methods Series, vol. 16, Sage, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> A DeStefano, *The War on Human Trafficking: US policy assessed*, Rutgers University Press, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> D Brennan, ‘Competing Claims of Victimhood? Foreign and domestic victims of trafficking in the United States’, *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, vol. 5, issue 4, 2008, pp. 45–61.

influence, not just domestically, but also at the global level.<sup>10</sup> Under these circumstances, anti-trafficking NGOs morphed into profit-oriented ventures, moving away from social service provision models. One investigative journalist observes that after the 2008 recession, US-based abolitionist NGOs seem to comprise one of the few sectors experiencing steady financing and growth.<sup>11</sup> Recent years have seen an increase in federally funded anti-trafficking initiatives focused on the sex industry with programming on raising awareness, education and training of community members, schools, law enforcement agencies and hospital staff. The *anti-trafficking industrial complex*<sup>12</sup> supports the careers of numerous actors in the abolitionist movement and provides financially lucrative opportunities for anyone associated with it, a phenomenon I conceptualise as *secondary exploitation*.<sup>13</sup> Artists, writers, actors, directors, internet and mainstream media journalists are exploring their ‘feelings and ideas’ about prostitution and trafficking and packaging these as artworks, books, articles and films. These moral entrepreneurs are often privileged and have access to mainstream cultural and political spaces, reaching a receptive audience. In this way, through their own success, moral entrepreneurs are helping disseminate the abolitionist construction of victimhood while gaining public exposure and ‘positioning themselves as white saviours’.<sup>14</sup>

The exhibit at John Jay College is a case in point. When the gallery showed a ‘sex trafficking’ themed exhibition, artists capitalised on the symbolic association between the themes of trafficking and justice, given its location at the New York City criminal justice college.

<sup>10</sup> Y C Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, sex, and human trafficking*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> A E Moore, ‘Special Report: Money and lies in anti-human trafficking NGOs’, *Truth-Out*, 27 January 2015, retrieved 6 January 2016, <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/28763-special-report-money-and-lies-in-anti-human-trafficking-ngos>

<sup>12</sup> C Leigh, ‘Anti-Trafficking Industrial Complex Awareness Day-1st Edition 2015’, retrieved 24 August 2016, <https://storify.com/carolleigh/anti-trafficking-industrial-complex-awareness-day>; see also K Kempadoo, ‘The White Man’s Burden Revisited’, *Open Democracy*, 11 January 2015, retrieved 6 January 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/kamala-kempadoo/white-man%E2%80%99s-burden-revisited>

<sup>13</sup> C Cojocaru, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> T Cole, ‘The White Savior Industrial Complex’, *The Atlantic*, 21 March 2012, retrieved 6 January 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>

## Why an Anthropology of Experience?

**Trafficked.** I was trafficked into the sex industry twice, and I place both instances within the extreme end of force, fraud and coercion outlined in the UN Trafficking Protocol.<sup>15</sup> The first time, in Romania, I was abducted by a person I knew from my neighbourhood and sold to a pimp for several hundred dollars, a situation from which I escaped on my own. The second time, seeking to put as much physical distance between myself and the pimp from whom I had escaped only a few months earlier, I accepted a contract to work in Japan as a hostess. I did so after being assured that the job entailed serving drinks and talking to men in the evening, and explicitly prohibited sexual labour. However, once I arrived at my destination in a hostess club in Tokyo, the working conditions were much different from those that had been described. Club staff and the brokers in Romania routinely exercised physical violence and sexual abuse and made constant threats of harm to my family.

**Activist.** Unwilling to endure further violence, abuse and exploitation, I devised an escape plan with other trafficked women. Although we failed and each ended up sold to different hostess clubs, I did not forget I had promised to help them escape. Upon the completion of my six-month entertainer contract, I resolved to return to Japan on a tourist visa and work independently in different hostess bars. This marked the beginning of about eight years of facilitating and aiding the escape of women who wanted to leave exploitative situations in sex work. During this time, I constructed a small but efficient network to help migrant workers gain some control over their lives, while I kept my own identity and position concealed by shifting across different layers of underground and mainstream society strata, negotiating status and identities, and collecting data.

**Scholar.** Upon relocating to the US, I was referred to programmes attending to the needs of victims of domestic violence and trafficking. These programmes made me witness first-hand the devastating consequences that poorly informed approaches to rescue, rehabilitation

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<sup>15</sup> UN General Assembly, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 15 November 2000.

and reintegration have on the lives of trafficked and voluntary sex workers. I noted that the abolitionist representations of trafficking in the media were based on a manufactured framework of victimhood, inconsistent with the experiences of me and my peers as trafficked women. Because major actors in the anti-trafficking field were silent whenever I pointed out these discrepancies, I turned to empirical research for answers. After spending a considerable amount of time examining the literature from an analytical perspective stripped of ideological convictions, I concluded that the abolitionist claims should be placed in the context of a growing moral crusade against prostitution.<sup>16</sup> During this process, as I took interest in the underlying mechanisms of competing constructions of victimhood, I turned my attention to the language and performances required to establish the dominant narrative. This is how I learnt that my experiences have an epistemological value that can provide a counter-narrative to the dominant anti-trafficking discourse. Some of these experiences are related here as a part of an ‘anthropology of experience’, by which I mean the processing, interpretation and expression of my own experiences within transnational socio-cultural contexts, placing emphasis on my meaning making processes, and on my interpretation of how the objectification of similar realities were situated within the artistic space of the gallery.<sup>17</sup>

The dominant anti-trafficking discourse relies almost exclusively on a hybrid framework of *victim-survivor*<sup>18</sup> narratives. More specifically, the abolitionists’ power lies in their ability to control and mould these narratives into simple yet emotionally powerful tropes, which are vital to the survival of the movement. In the years following the introduction of the TVPA, feminist leaders of the abolitionist movement maintained the anti-trafficking discourse as one privileging trafficking into the sex

<sup>16</sup> R Weitzer ‘The Social Construction of Sex Trafficking: Ideology and institutionalization of a moral crusade’, *Politics & Society*, vol. 35, issue 3, 2007, pp. 447—475; G Ellison, ‘Criminalizing the Payment for Sex in Northern Ireland: Sketching the contours of a moral panic’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 28 Sept 2015.

<sup>17</sup> V W Turner and E M Bruner, *The Anthropology of Experience*, University of Illinois Press, 1986.

<sup>18</sup> The survivor narrative is what gives the trafficking victim template its lifeline. A survivor’s story will re-assure the audience of the existence of other victims waiting to be rescued. See also C Cojocaru, ‘Sex Trafficking, Captivity, and Narrative: Constructing victimhood with the goal of salvation’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 39, issue 2, 2015, p. 183.

industry over other forms of trafficking. They appealed to collective sympathy via awareness-raising campaigns relating the suffering of sexually exploited women and girls and highlighting gender-based violence through emotionally charged survivor testimonies. Abolitionist activists gradually introduced impactful survivor narratives of ‘reformed prostitutes’ alongside those of the typical rescued victim of trafficking, condensing shared experiences of exploitation into a common denominator framework to justify the classification of voluntary sex work as trafficking. This juxtaposition aimed to relay the message that prostitution is inherently violence against women, thus obscuring the differences between trafficking and voluntary sex work. Thus the dominant anti-trafficking discourse conceptualises trafficking interchangeably with voluntary sex work.<sup>19</sup>

### *Beautiful Dead Bodies Gallery*

When I entered the Anya and Andrew Shiva gallery on the opening night of the show, I thought I had walked into an eerie materialisation of Rutvica Andrijasevic’s essay ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies’.<sup>20</sup>

‘In order to convey the condition of abuse perpetuated by traffickers, the campaigns resort to the visual metaphor of the doll as a privileged signifier. This is most clearly visible in the campaign in the Baltic States that makes explicit reference to the doll. The lifeless body, the cords and the “invisible” third party all invite viewers to associate a victim of trafficking with a puppet. Variations on the theme are also employed, displaying, for example, the same female body in a crouched position or simply body-parts such as hanging legs.’<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> J A Chuang, ‘Rescuing Trafficking from Ideological Capture: Prostitution reform and anti-trafficking law and policy’, *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, vol. 158, issue 6, 2010, pp. 1655–1728.

<sup>20</sup> R Andrijasevic, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, issue 1, 2007, pp. 24–44.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Andrijasevic's analysis of trafficking prevention campaigns directed at Eastern European women in the late 1990s and early 2000s focuses on the representations of female bodies as immobile, lifeless, and doll-like, sketching a stereotypical image of the migrant sex worker as lacking autonomy and self-awareness. She problematises the victim imagery as contributing to sexual objectification as well as reinforcement of traditional gender roles by encouraging women to stay at home and not seek employment abroad. Despite the declared intent of these campaigns to make women aware of the dangers posed by migration and sex work, women's migration for labour in post-communist Eastern Europe was a widespread phenomenon. The Western discourse of prostitution as inherently violence against women was irrelevant to most migrant women. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) carried out anti-trafficking campaigns to deter women's migration, portraying danger in graphic and sexually objectifying terms. Women were shown in positions of vulnerability, such as identified as victims of sexual slavery or shown as inert bodies—marionettes on strings. Short accompanying stories narrated violence suffered by women in prostitution abroad, a strategy meant to alter women's internal schemas so they did not leave their poverty ridden, albeit *secure* homes. Such warnings simultaneously projected Western fears of the sexualised other and generated a new classification for the undesirable racialised and gendered transient labourer—the trafficking victim.<sup>22</sup> As evident from my field-notes, these images did not have the desired effect:<sup>23</sup>

In my hometown in Romania, most people were seeking work abroad, making use of networks of relatives and friends who had already secured employment abroad. In small communities like the one I grew up in, the collective concern about the people who went to work abroad required the sharing of information and stories for the ones at home. Migrants, both men or women,

<sup>22</sup> R Kapur, 'The "Other" Side of Globalization: The legal regulation of cross-border movements', *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 22, issue 3/4, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> I rely on field notes to illustrate the context with elements showing my survivor validity. The field notes were written from 1998 to 2008. To my knowledge, no one has kept a journal, taken field notes, or documented their experiences as I did the whole time I was trafficked, and afterward, or, if so, no one has spoken about it publicly. The field notes format is valuable to facilitate shifting through timelines, as the exhibition was in 2015.

when returning home from abroad, maintained that, despite experiencing less than ideal working conditions, the goal was to go back and look for better opportunities. These personal narratives were migrants' expressions of their lived experiences. They were part of a larger process of cultural construction of values and standards, and became integral to how communities related to returning migrants. Women were more likely to find work than men, especially the ones who were young and attractive. Growing up in post-communist Romania, it was not immediately clear to me that women in my neighbourhood were migrating for sex work, but the general terminology used in discussions by parents and siblings when referring to these young women, revolved around descriptions implying they were privately contracted dancers and bartenders. In the late 1990s, the main international destinations for Romanian migrant women in my neighbourhood were Greece, Italy, Switzerland and Japan. There was a clear difference between the women who were autonomous agents choosing to leave Romania and work in bars and hotels abroad, and the ones working with a pimp, mainly at hotels catering to tourists or wealthy Romanian men. These migration experiences on the ground contrast sharply with the anti-trafficking discourse. This is not to say that there were no instances of trafficking into the sex industry, as happened to me in 1998 while searching for a part-time job at a major tourist destination on the Romanian Black Sea coast.

I walked around the gallery looking at how the artists imagined sex workers as victims of trafficking. A different story was weaving in front of my eyes—one where the women in these representations had no control over how they were portrayed. Devoid of voices and life force, these images could represent any scenario, tell any story, be given any interpretation; they were objectified and used to convey a message I found misleading and harmful.



Image 1. Photograph of Eleni Lyra's work, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery

## Frames and Images of Shape-Shifting Abolitionism

A row of photographs by artist Eleni Lyra<sup>24</sup> depicted a pair of white legs, as above, looking as if they belonged to a child or a young woman. Resting on red cloth, the legs appeared bound together by invisible restraints. As stated in the exhibit's introduction, positioning in these photographs was

<sup>24</sup> E Lyra, Athens Photo Festival 2015, retrieved 6 January 2016, <http://www.photofestival.gr/exhibitions/eleni-lyra>



intended to conjure the association of trafficked individuals with very young women.<sup>25</sup> I felt this display of dismembered legs only accentuated the commodification of what many see as women's 'innate vulnerability'. Their fragility and innocence are sanctioned under the pretense of a moral imperative to prioritise and 'save' the deserving victim, as well as 'raise awareness' about the existence of the undeserving, yet possibly redeemable, one. Situated at the core of the anti-trafficking movement, these categories propose a fluid conceptualisation of victimhood, constantly changing and adapting to benefit moral entrepreneurs who use them to alter, construct and mould exploitative and highly prejudicial representations of sex work and trafficking. This *secondary exploitation* is thus carried out by entrepreneurial entities who can profit from the fascination and voyeurism surrounding trafficking and sexual commerce. An increasing number of artists, celebrities and professionals are generating captivating and suggestive imagery<sup>26</sup> of sexual violence and exploitation in the name of humanitarian activism. Paradoxically, sex workers themselves are criminalised and stigmatised for commodifying their own bodies, images and stories. Prostitution, pornography and erotic literature are deemed obscene, immoral and exploitative—criminalised or controlled when sex workers make a living from it, but not when artists, the media, or service providers are profiting.

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<sup>25</sup> See the following introduction to the artist's work in the exhibit: 'Eleni Lyra's work comprises 9 photographs digitally printed on fabric panels depicting children's legs on red cloth. The youngsters' legs are spindly, and appear malnourished and are in some of the works, crossed and hanging reminiscent of the Crucifixion. Indeed they can be read as martyred children not only because of their legs' positioning but also because of the red cloth that serves as background which we associate with Christ's passion' in 'Of Human Bondage', Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery, retrieved 6 January 2016, <https://shivagalleryjijay.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/of-human-bondage/>

<sup>26</sup> An example of a collective of artists building careers out of using trafficking into the sex industry as inspiration or an interpretation medium can be found at ArtWorks for Freedom, retrieved 26 July 2016, <http://www.artworksforfreedom.org>; and 'Art Against Human Trafficking', Amo Tiffani: Multi-media journalist, retrieved 26 July 2016, <http://tiffaniamo.com/art-against-human-trafficking/>



Image 2. Photograph of Photini Papahatzi's work, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery

In this photograph, a woman wearing an outfit made of a few strings tied around her body is sitting on a bed, looking away from the camera. The viewer cannot be certain whether she is under duress, or if she is hurt. The description accompanying the glossy photograph points the observer in the direction of trafficking and victimisation. As part of a series titled *Studio Utopia*, Greek artist Photini Papahatzi<sup>27</sup> said he photographed and interviewed Albanian, Bulgarian and Romanian sex workers in brothels in Athens where they 'have been made to prostitute themselves for 15 Euros'. Using the term 'made' places the women in a position of passive inertia, lingering in a liminal state somewhere

<sup>27</sup> P Papahatzi, *Studio Utopia*, retrieved 15 January 2016, <http://www.photinipapahatzi.com/studio-utopia>

between symbolic and instrumental victimhood. Artists who take on such narrow perspectives contribute to the status degradation of sex workers by creating artwork that assign sex workers ‘passive victims’ identities, thus taking part in their continued exploitation. Furthermore, the universalisation of these identities justifies the increase in punitive legal measures against both workers and their clients<sup>28</sup> and interventions in the lives of migrant workers through highly publicised raids.<sup>29</sup> Although there is nothing in this photograph to suggest enslavement or exploitation, categorising it as trafficking into the sex industry supports the damaging anti-sex work discourse.

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<sup>28</sup> J Levy and P Jakobsson, ‘Sweden’s Abolitionist Discourse and Law: Effects on the dynamics of Swedish sex work and on the lives of Sweden’s sex workers’, *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, vol. 14, issue 5, 2014, pp. 593–607.

<sup>29</sup> R Galusca, ‘Slave Hunters, Brothel Busters, and Feminist Interventions: Investigative journalists as anti-sex-trafficking humanitarians’, *Feminist Formations*, vol. 24, issue 2, 2012, pp. 1–24.



Image 3. Photograph of Photini Papahatzis's work, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery

In this photograph two women, presumably in a brothel, seem to greet each other. The beauty of connection between two people is shattered by the artwork's intent to force the subjects of Papahatzis's gaze into the abolitionist tradition of objectification of trafficked bodies. One female headless body appears immobilised in a mannequin-like pose, arms gracefully opened, almost like in a dance. She is almost nude, the only visible garment being a red bra tied with a string, going around her torso in a crisscross pattern. The other woman, whose visible face is slightly blurred but still recognisable, wears a frosty pink bra and frilly panties. As she enters the room from behind a red curtain, she looks open to an embrace with the woman whose head is removed from the photograph. Perhaps unintentionally, the image captures the bond between the women,

as their body language suggests openness to each other, trust and comfort. It does not signal tension or fear, or an arched, hardened posture of an individual under chronic anxiety. The picture objectifies sex workers' bodies—not because it depicts sex work, but because the artist's own mutilation of that one woman's image renders her dismembered body fetishised and used to advance a dehumanising anti-prostitution agenda. This enactment of power dynamics within art and within anti-trafficking's 'rescuer-rescued' hierarchy engenders and reinforces social inequalities. In the abolitionist imagination, the 'prostituted woman' is accused of operating under false consciousness when asserting agency, and then punished by being assigned a deviant identity.<sup>30</sup> These representations force sex workers into a submissive position, not only by the (allegedly) exploitative pimps and clients, but also by rescuers' and social workers' interventions. Such classifications are often inconsistent with sex workers' own perceptions of themselves, and unrepresentative of realities on the ground.

Both in Romania and Japan, I lived and worked with women who were either trafficked or voluntary sex workers. Voluntary sex workers defended their choices to engage in sexual labour, stressing the importance of being economically independent, and preferred to be treated as businesswomen,<sup>31</sup> rejecting the victim label. These women routinely took time to teach trafficked young women (like me) important survival strategies and tactics. They were aware of how different our circumstances were and hoped we could use those skills to gain independence and avoid further exploitation. The victim status is problematic for trafficked women as well; some of the trafficked sex workers avoided the victim label and saw their situations as the result of bad luck or their own misinterpretation of risk, faulting themselves for trusting the wrong people. Some stressed the role of their own choices and circumstances when making labour migration decisions.<sup>32</sup> For instance, while in Japan I distinguished

<sup>30</sup> This is based on informal interviews with service providers and sex workers in New York, part of an ethnographic study on specialised courts and prostitution diversion programs I am conducting for an MA thesis; for the concept of false consciousness, see A Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, volumes 1–3, SLP edition, Colombia University Press, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> K Chin and J O Finckenauer, *Selling Sex Overseas: Chinese women and the realities of prostitution and global sex trafficking*, NYU Press, New York, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> C M Jacobsen and ML Skilbrei, "'Reproachable Victims'? Representations and self-representations of Russian women involved in transnational prostitution', *Ethnos*, vol. 75, issue 2, 2010, pp. 190–212.

foreign<sup>33</sup> hostesses according to their status as independent or trafficked hostesses. Independent migrant hostesses entered Japan on their own, with visitor, student or marriage visas or as entertainers on a contract brokered by recruitment agencies in their home countries collaborating with Japanese *promoters*. Trafficked hostesses entered Japan mostly on entertainment visas, with some overstaying the legal limit, and becoming subject to various degrees of fraud, force, coercion or deception. Most migrant and trafficked hostesses I worked with in Japan came from Russia, Eastern Europe, Brazil, Thailand, and the Philippines. All these women wanted to improve their economic status at home, and had responded to opportunities to do so. Even when reaching their destinations and realising they had been misled about the nature of the work, many preferred to adjust to the working conditions, hoping the future would bring positive changes. Thus, the opportunity to earn money to buy a house or provide for their families back home remained attractive even to some of the trafficked women, as a sufficiently profitable set of opportunities outweighed most instances of workplace exploitation.

For most women, economic opportunities in Japan presented enough of an incentive to offer their clients not only the entertainment required by the hostess clubs, but to also engage in exchange of sexual services for money or gifts. As non-western foreigners<sup>34</sup> working in the complex Tokyo *mizu-shobai*<sup>35</sup> industry, we were in precarious social positions. We were tolerated because the Japanese considered us as providing a useful service to their society. Most of the time we were invisible and often relegated to an underclass status. We were assumed to be illiterate, poor, corrupt and morally deficient. When our presence was too obvious to ignore, we became threatening *others*, sexual deviants disrupting the social fabric of the destination country.<sup>36</sup>

The following excerpt from my field notes from 1998 to 2001 illustrates these points:

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<sup>33</sup> By 'foreign' I refer to citizens of non-western nations. Women from the US, Australia or the UK were foreign as well, but they had a higher status in Japanese society, and that includes differences in opportunities for work.

<sup>34</sup> In Japan there is a *gaijin* 'foreigner' hierarchy in which nationals from western countries, like the US, Australia, France, Germany or The Netherlands enjoy a higher status and obvious privilege compared to people from places such as Russia, Romania, China or Bangladesh.

<sup>35</sup> *Mizu-shobai*, literally 'water business', refers to bars, restaurants and entertainment clubs open at night.

<sup>36</sup> R Kapur, 2003.

Following an attempt to escape during my first six weeks in Japan, the *promoter* picked me up from the first bar he had placed me in and took me to a Philippine Pub in Ikebukuro. Despite the initial shock, the Filipinas and I got along well and became friends. I learnt that life in the Philippines was hard—their families were struggling. The opportunities to come to Japan were valued and appreciated as a chance to lift one's family out of poverty. Even if many women were married at home, they separated their lives in the Philippines from their entertainer-hostess identities in Japan. Some women had intimate relationships with a number of Japanese clients, who also provided money and gifts and occasionally took them and their friends out. They did their jobs, helped each other and made the best out of their experiences. Unlike most of these women, I did not agree with the system and tried to escape numerous times, only to be brought back by the police. I resisted in any way I could. I protested the long working hours, the club requirement that hostesses consume only alcohol,<sup>37</sup> and the forced daily cleaning of the bar before a one-hour or more meeting was held. My co-workers agreed that the system in that bar was especially exploitative but also pointed out that we were there only for a few months to work and collect a salary at the end of the contract. For them it was worth it to simply put up with the club management, rather than risk being penalised or sent home early. My one-person rebellion was making them anxious and added to their hardships. They promised to take on some of my chores if I stopped resisting and antagonising *tencho*.<sup>38</sup> They saw my protests as a source of tension, rather than a tactic to ensure better working conditions for all of us. To illustrate how my actions were putting all of us in jeopardy, the Filipinas held a meeting in our room and opened up about some of their most well-guarded secrets. One of the girls, Eri,<sup>39</sup> was only 16 years old and came to Japan using her cousin's passport. She wanted to go to university in the Philippines. If I ran away again and the police investigated the club closer, her dream was

<sup>37</sup> We were not allowed to drink any other beverage—soft drinks or tea—during work hours. We had to drink alcohol to add to high-value sales.

<sup>38</sup> *Tencho* is a person holding a managerial position in an organisation. In a hostess club, a *tencho* is in charge of the whole club and answers to the owner, *papa-san* or *mama-san*.

<sup>39</sup> These names are not the hostesses' real names.



going to crumble. Mari was married and had two children. Older than most of us, she was worried that her *promoter* may not hire her for another contract. Gemma was the sole supporter of a family of five. Rika was an *overstay*,<sup>40</sup> replacing a *run-away*<sup>41</sup> hostess. Neither *mama-san*, nor *tencho*, knew about her true identity or that she had replaced one of their hostesses. Rika's plan was to return to the Philippines with the *runaway*'s passport, come back to Japan, and help the *runaway* also return to the Philippines and avoid the legal penalties for overstaying one's visa. The other women were silent and watched me think about the complex situations behind every single story. They were all true. I knew the *runaway*, Yuri—she sometimes met us at a coffee shop with her boyfriend, a Filipino dancer who was himself overstaying his visa and working in a disco-restaurant on the outskirts of Tokyo; Eri's passport picture hardly resembled her; Gemma's story was not that different from other women's, or even my own. Within the most coercive of environments, these women were going to negotiate survival and would not jeopardise one another. They would find ways to prevail despite abuse, coercion and even violence.

Much like the women I worked and lived with, both in Romania and Japan, I can attest that even within the most coercive and violent situations there was a sufficient degree of agency and autonomy to ensure survival and self-preservation. Portrayals equating all selling of sexual services with chronic victimisation and 'bought and sold rape'<sup>42</sup> are also disputed by empirical studies of sex workers,<sup>43</sup> as well as my own observations of voluntary and trafficked sex workers' experiences.

<sup>40</sup> In hostess jargon, an *overstay* is a migrant worker who has exceeded the stay provisions of his/her visa.

<sup>41</sup> In hostess jargon, a *runaway* is a migrant worker on entertainment visa who ran away from the club.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, J Raymond, 'Perspective on Human Rights: Prostitution is rape that's paid for : The U.S. military must have zero tolerance for this exploitation of women and children, at home and abroad', LA Times, 11 December 1995, retrieved 10 August 2016, [http://articles.latimes.com/1995-12-11/local/me-12813\\_1\\_human-rights](http://articles.latimes.com/1995-12-11/local/me-12813_1_human-rights); D Post, 'The Legalization of Prostitution by State Parties is a Violation of International Law', *Against Pornography*, retrieved 10 August 2016, <https://againstpornography.org/prostitutionasviolation.html>

<sup>43</sup> N Mai, 'Embodied Cosmopolitanisms: The subjective mobility of migrants working in the global sex industry', *Gender, Place and Culture*, vol. 20, issue 1, 2013, pp. 107—124.



Although interpersonal violence, emotional abuse and rape have lasting and often devastating psychological consequences, the factors influencing personal experiences are multifaceted and complex, especially in cases involving interpersonal violence. Individuals may react to traumatic events in ways that do not always fit into neatly delimited categories.<sup>44</sup> Most of the women I had contact with experienced violence to some degree, whether it was at the hands of family members, romantic partners, other men and women, pimps, clients or bar staff. Despite personally experiencing violent incidents, neither I nor most of these women would identify with disempowering and stigmatising conceptualisations of victimisation or exploitation in the sex industry. The anti-trafficking sexual humanitarian discourse lumps all women who sell sex into a common category: whether they are trafficked or not, they are invariably understood to be vulnerable, passive and witless victims. According to abolitionist logic, these women's perceived lack of agency and self-determination justifies a range of coercive interventions,<sup>45</sup> from stigmatising labelling, to highly intrusive and destabilising rescue missions.

In the radical feminist imagination, agency is replaced with the concept of *coercive bonding*, framing sex workers as submissive or as passive victims of an obscure but powerful offender.<sup>46</sup> A rather clumsy attempt to conflate a number of theoretical elements related to torture, domestic violence, prisoners of war, and rape trauma, and apply it to voluntary and trafficked sex workers alike, the *trauma coerced bonding* theory is a new effort to reformulate the concept of *false consciousness*. According to Raghavan and Doychak:

...the literature does offer a rich body of observational and clinical data drawn from case studies as varied as prisoners of war, hostages, child abuse victims, and intimate partner violence. ... These observed changes, for victims who form trauma-coerced

<sup>44</sup> G A Bonnano, 'Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events?', *American Psychologist*, vol. 59, issue 1, 2004, p. 20.

<sup>45</sup> J L Dunn, 'The Politics of Empathy: Social movements and victim repertoires', *Sociological Focus*, vol. 37, issue 3, 2004, pp. 235–25.

<sup>46</sup> C Raghavan and K Doychak, 'Trauma-coerced Bonding and Victims of Sex Trafficking: Where do we go from here?', *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health and Human Resilience*, vol. 17, issue 2, 2015, pp. 583–587.

bonds, are marked by a shift in their internal reality and change in cognition because the abuser's persistent and invasive tactics have successfully deteriorated the victim's sense of self. As a consequence of this cognitive shift and lost sense of self and meaning, the victim is forced to adopt a new worldview entirely dependent on the abuser's perspective. ... While the construct of *trauma-coerced bonding* has been explored across different abusive relationships, one important abusive context—sex trafficking—have been less well documented in research. ... The relationship between a sex-trafficking victim and her abuser mirrors the power imbalances and abusive control dynamics within an intimate partnership.<sup>47</sup>

Reflecting on years of living and working with trafficked women and voluntary sex workers, and drawing on my field notes, I find Raghavan's portrayal of trafficked women inconsistent with the way my peers and I interpret our own experiences. As trafficked, I was aware of the differences, and boundaries between forced and consensual sex; I could evaluate and prepare for varying levels of intensity or coercion in sexual exploitation, unwanted sexual contact or even rape. I was always able to tell a well-rehearsed lie borrowed from other sex workers' extensive repertoire of excuses to avoid any kind of sexual activity. Similarly, women who accepted my offer of shelter, once they decided to escape traffickers and exploiters, would look for work as independent agents (*arubaito*)<sup>48</sup> rather than return home without money.

Like other attempts to universalise discourse,<sup>49</sup> the use of conceptual constructions such as *coercive bonding* and *false consciousness* fails to address human trafficking or the structural inequalities that sustain it. Instead, it creates a confusing victimhood rhetoric, contributing to an already deeply flawed theoretical background that informs policy makers on sex work and trafficking, and enforces current systems of domination and social control to compel sex workers into compliance. Thus, *secondary exploitation*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 583.

<sup>48</sup> In Japan, *arubaito* is a term used to describe part-time work; in the case of non-Japanese hostesses, whether they were residing in Japan legally or illegally, *arubaito* came to signify their status as working for themselves, rather than for an agent. These women could not find work in any other areas except sex work, so their *arubaito* opportunities were rather limited.

<sup>49</sup> K Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, 1991, pp. 1241—1299.

takes place in state-sanctioned prostitution diversion programmes, operating in collaboration with the anti-trafficking industrial complex to force sex workers into accepting services aimed at integration within the ranks of mainstream ‘respectability’.

Depending on their willingness to submit to being rescued and ‘redeemed’, sex workers are subjected to varying levels of state-mandated therapy. Those who subscribe to redemptive approaches view women in the sex industry as passive victims, or utterly hopeless, broken human beings. When these professionals work with formerly trafficked women and voluntary sex workers who do not fit into this version of victimhood, they clash, as each side attempts to defend their conviction and position. Service providers often experience difficulty in reconciling their theoretical and ideological principles with their clients’ definitions of self, worldviews or the way they construct their identities. These attitudes reinforce stigmatisation<sup>50</sup> and place women in positions of subordination, contributing to the increase in vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

### The ‘Perfect Victim’s’ Burden

Trafficking victims are constructed to fit the *ideal victim* trope<sup>51</sup>—passive, helpless and defenceless. Even if this category may have been purposed to avoid the harmful effects of prostitution stigma, it has not succeeded in relieving the shame or the blame that comes with the labels of ‘victim’ and ‘prostitute’, since the former is associated with weakness and the latter with immorality and deviancy. In the exhibition at John Jay, the artists enacted this cultural stigma as a specific technology of power<sup>52</sup> defining what these bodies projected as art. From the creative process to the exhibit space, the artists were the ones controlling the discourse and shaping the way viewers made meaning of these portrayals of women as victims. Images in the gallery privileged the artists’ own interpretations of sex work and trafficking, thus facilitating stigmatising technologies of power and the ‘keeping in, out and away’<sup>53</sup> of sex workers and trafficked persons.

<sup>50</sup> B G Link and J C Phelan, ‘Conceptualizing Stigma’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 27, 2001, pp. 363–385.

<sup>51</sup> N Christie, ‘The Ideal Victim’ in E A Fattah (ed.), *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy: Reorienting the justice system*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1986, pp. 17–30.

<sup>52</sup> M Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, issue 4, 1982, pp. 777–95.

<sup>53</sup> B G Link and J C Phelan, ‘Stigma Power’, *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 103, 2004, pp. 24–32.



Image 4. Photograph of Steven Cavallo's work, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery

Artist Steven Cavallo contributed to the exhibit with watercolour renditions of Korean 'comfort women' on the Japanese front during the Second World War. Cavallo attempted to merge two historically and culturally different eras<sup>54</sup> into the already flawed mainstream anti-trafficking discourse, which does a great disservice to trafficked and voluntary sex workers from both periods. I examined the watercolours

<sup>54</sup> I am referring to 1) Japan up to the end of WWII, and 2) globally, but especially the US, from mid 1990s to today.

shown in this article closely, noting the pained expressions on women's faces and their bodies placed against backgrounds depicting partitions, or swamps. In one of these images, a woman is represented lying on muddy vegetation with ripped yellow crime scene tape over her torso. Her eyes vacant, staring somewhere above, seemingly disconnected from her body. The other watercolours reproduce references to Christian martyrdom and ritual sacrifice of piety and innocence, which I interpreted as an attempt to connect the suffering of the Korean 'comfort women' to today's Western audiences. Thus, these watercolours are not telling the story of Korean women's misery, but instead offer a sanitised adaptation to the Western interpretation of suffering, supporting the dominant anti-trafficking discourse rather than giving a voice to the oppressed.

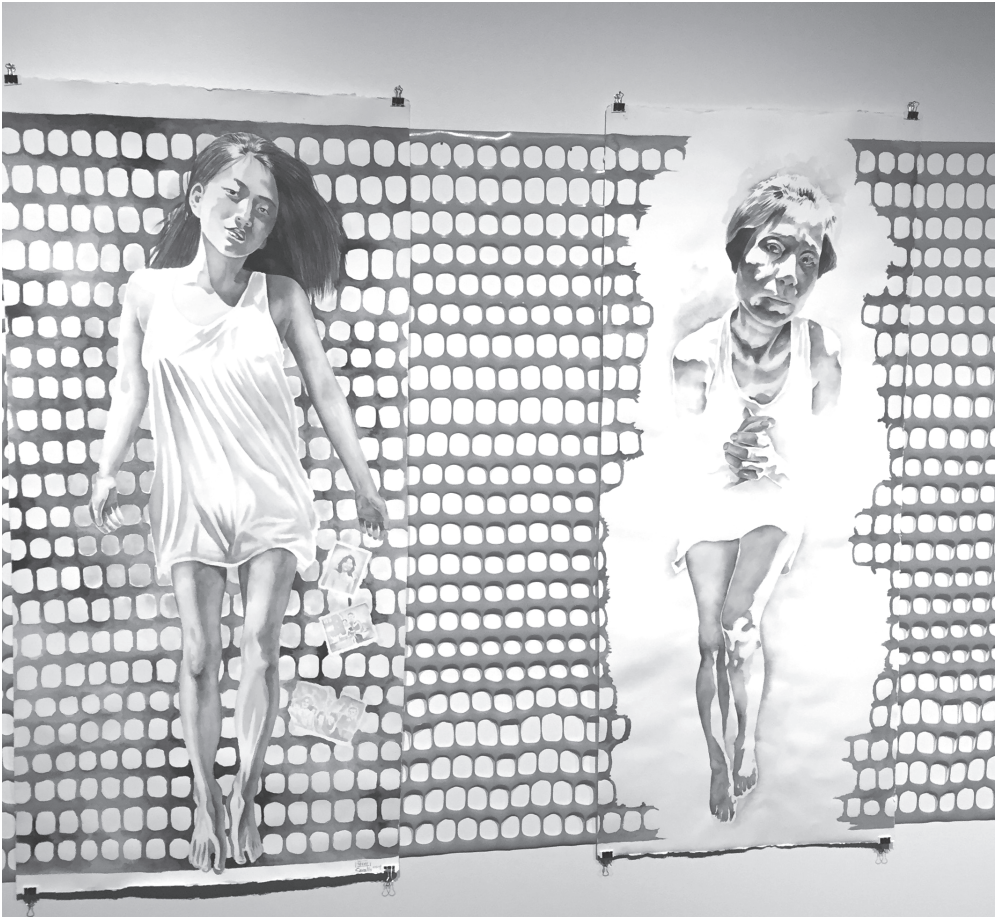


Image 5. Photograph of Steven Cavallo's work, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery

After his speech at the gallery, I asked Cavallo to reconsider the way he interpreted sex workers and formerly trafficked women's personal narratives. I explained that his manipulation of imagery can have an impact, however indirectly, on the already warped perception of trafficking and voluntary sex work. Even as I cited relevant research, Cavallo dismissed all my arguments as inconsistent with his views or experiences, instead insisting I visit him at his studio, to 'talk more about Korean "comfort women" and "sex trafficking"'.





Image 6. Model for Cavallo's work, taking selfie.

The disconnect between the self-representations of trafficked people and the frames circulated within the dominant anti-trafficking discourse became most evident when I saw a young woman posing in front of one of the watercolours of a 'comfort woman' to take a picture of herself with a phone on a selfie-stick. She introduced herself as Cavallo's model for the paintings in the exhibition and was accompanied by another young woman who told me she posed for the same series. That image was the most difficult one for me to understand. I looked at these young women laughing and posing with works showing bruised and violated bodies—art intended to make a statement about gender-based violence and sexual slavery from the Second World War to today.

I stood there silent for a while, watching all these people gathered in the gallery, sipping wine, making small talk about the tragedies of human

trafficking, and analysing the artworks. I wondered if the women represented in those photographs would agree with how their bodies were fetishised and objectified, or how their lives and experiences were constructed and distorted for other people's profit, while perhaps their own choice to commodify themselves was met with hostility and subjected to stigmatisation and criminalisation.

## Conclusion

The anti-trafficking movement has facilitated the development of profitable niche markets for the media, artists, celebrities, social services and criminal justice professionals. While prostitution abolitionists' awareness-raising campaigns rely on disseminating their ideology by captivating and titillating eager audiences, in the past five years the symbolic power accumulated by the mainstream anti-trafficking discourse has shifted to instrumental power. Stigma, poverty, violence and other injustices confronting most sex workers and trafficked individuals in their daily lives are processed, framed and packed into simple media content for the public's rapid and ravenous consumption. Despite the emotionally charged frames allowing spectators temporary glimpses of the suffering of the *other*, most audiences are protected from these uncomfortable realities by their own socio-economic status or racial and other privilege. These provide the necessary social distance for interested parties to fetishise women trafficked into the sex industry and draw gratification without experiencing trauma. However, even with that layer of social insulation protecting the misery voyeur from becoming mesmerised and falling into the abyss of human degradation, one must be careful to firmly delineate the boundaries between identifying the trafficked person (or the willing sex worker) and identifying with one.

It became evident to me that even in a space where discussion around trafficking, sex work, victimhood and survival was presumably safe to have, a counter-narrative to the dominant anti-trafficking discourse was not welcome. Empirical research on trafficking, prostitution, and the 'Swedish model' of criminalising clients indicates that abolitionist activists and law makers exclude sex workers from the dialogue that informs relevant policies. This othering process facilitates the relegation of sex workers to a marginalised, stigmatised status, justifying the interventions in their lives and the silencing of their voices. Sex workers' rights organisations and academics warn about the professional, financial and political incentives motivating moral entrepreneurs to subdue sex workers



and allow only narratives aligned with the ideal trafficking victim archetype. My interrogation of the *secondary exploitation* at the gallery and challenge of the abolitionist sexual humanitarian paradigms placed me, the trafficking survivor, on the same plane with ‘unrepentant prostitutes’ who were challenging these discourses. My survivor validity was met with resistance, questioned and possibly rejected, even though the whole exhibition was dedicated to the ‘millions of victims of sex trafficking exploited and abused all over the world’. Paradoxically, a trafficked person like me, whose lived experiences are inconsistent with the abolitionist construction of victimhood, is burdened to prove that she has the right to resist these damaging representations and challenge the dominant discourse; to retrieve and redeem her own narratives from the abolitionists’ grasp; and to regain control over her representations and identities.

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# How to Stage a Raid: Police, media and the master narrative of trafficking

Annie Hill

## Abstract

The article analyses a UK police raid in 2005 on a West Midlands massage parlour called Cuddles. This raid to rescue victims of trafficking reflects a state approach that, despite police claims to the media, is not victim-centred. In publicising the raid, the police and media participate in discriminatory practices that reproduce a master narrative of trafficking and cause harm to the women the state purports to protect. This article examines details of the Cuddles raid and its aftermath that are obscured in the official account and offers an alternative interpretation of raid photographs circulated by the media. Findings suggest the rights of women targeted in raids are disregarded and the harm they experience dismissed in order to amplify the state's anti-trafficking agenda. Bringing a fuller story to the fore reveals that raids tell subjugated stories and create spectacles that can challenge the master narrative of trafficking disseminated to the British public.

**Keywords:** trafficking, police raids, master narrative of trafficking, right to privacy, sex work

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## Introduction

On 30 September 2005, West Midlands police raided Cuddles massage parlour, executing a warrant in human trafficking as part of a wider anti-crime campaign called Operation Strikeout. Female officers entered Cuddles first, with fifty officers in total participating in the raid to rescue victims of trafficking. Speaking to the media assembled in front of Cuddles, Detective Inspector Mark Nevitt said, 'As we anticipated that there would be a lot of half-dressed ladies in there, 25 female officers went into the building first, to ensure that the women were decent before the male officers went in'.<sup>1</sup> Complicating Nevitt's claim was the fact that male officers had already seen 'half-dressed ladies' when they entered Cuddles posing as clients.<sup>2</sup> The crucial difference on this day was that the police had invited the media to record the rescue of 'sex slaves'. Given the media presence, a scene of men storming Cuddles and putting women into vans would not produce the image of a trafficking raid the police wanted to convey. Thus, once female officers made sure the women inside Cuddles were 'decent', they walked nineteen presumed victims of trafficking outside to face the media.

The day after the raid, on 1 October 2005, headlines across British media reported a triumphant scene, including 'Sex slaves freed' (*Mirror*); 'Sex slaves freed as police smash human trafficking operation' (*Telegraph*); 'Foreign sex slaves freed in dramatic police raid' (*Scotsman*); and '19 "sex slaves" rescued in raid on massage parlour' (*Times*). These proclamations about liberating 'sex slaves' turned out to be premature. Within days, West Midlands police decided they had not discovered victims of trafficking at Cuddles. In one sense, the media got the story wrong. Police had not freed anyone from sexual slavery. But, in another sense, the media got the story 'right'. It reproduced the UK's master narrative of trafficking by publishing news articles about police saving 'sex slaves' along with photographs to authenticate that narrative. Photographs of the raid gave the British public a peek into the sex industry and the pleasure of seeing police saving white women. This dramatic scene occurred in a climate of heightened concern about trafficking. Since 2000, the British public had consumed media stories that portrayed trafficking as invading the UK at an ever-increasing rate. The media depicted Eastern European women as

<sup>1</sup> M Horsnell, '19 "sex slaves" rescued in raid on massage parlour', *The Times*, 1 October 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Male police officers posed as clients to investigate Cuddles and suspected the presence of trafficking due to the presence of migrant women.

the quintessential trafficking victim and severe cases of violence as typical of migrant women's experience in the sex trade. For example, the *BBC* introduced the web portal, *Slavery in Modern England*, linking to stories with headlines such as, 'They raped me again and again', 'Forced to have sex for 11 hours', 'Sex slave regrets "ruined" life', and 'Duped into selling herself for sex'.

The Cuddles raid also took place amid broader concerns in the UK about migration from Eastern Europe. In 2004, the European Union (EU) admitted ten countries, its largest expansion to date.<sup>3</sup> The EU is predicated on the free movement of goods, services, citizens and capital (Directive 2004/38/EC), but only Sweden, the UK and the Republic of Ireland granted Eastern EU citizens full access to their labour markets at that time. The Home Office estimated annual net migration to the UK of 13,000 people from the Accession 8, formerly communist countries with lower per capita incomes than Western EU states.<sup>4</sup> Instead, over twenty times that number migrated to the UK: from May 2004 to September 2005, 290,695 people migrated from Accession 8 states.<sup>5</sup> Migration prompted the UK to reverse its open door policy when Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007. Anti-trafficking raids carried out at this time occurred in a climate of anxiety over trafficking and the shattering of Home Office migration estimates. Within this context, the Cuddles raid served as a response to British concerns about the effects of EU expansion and as a reason to repress the sex industry.

This article analyses a police raid in 2005 on a West Midlands massage parlour called Cuddles. The raid reflects a state approach that, despite police claims to the media, is not victim-centred. In publicising the Cuddles raid, the police and media participate in discriminatory practices that reproduce a master narrative of trafficking and cause harm to the women the state purports to protect. In what follows, I examine details of the

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<sup>3</sup> The new EU member states included Cyprus, Malta and the Accession 8: Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and the Czech Republic. These eight states were grouped together in part because the lower per capita incomes of their citizens suggested accession would trigger their migration to wealthier states in the West.

<sup>4</sup> N Watt and P Wintour, 'How immigration came to haunt Labour: The inside story', *Guardian*, 24 March 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Home Office et al., 'Accession Monitoring Report', 22 August 2006. See also N Morris and S Castle, 'UK economy boosted by influx of workers from eastern Europe', *Independent*, 8 February 2006.

Cuddles raid and its aftermath, obscured by the official narrative of rescue, and I offer an alternative interpretation of raid photographs circulated in the media. Findings suggest that the rights of women targeted in raids are disregarded and the harm they experience dismissed in order to amplify the state's anti-trafficking agenda. Bringing a fuller story to the fore reveals that raids also tell subjugated stories and create spectacles that can challenge the master narrative of trafficking disseminated to the British public.

## Rise of the Master Narrative of Trafficking

The UK occupies a middle ground in the range of repression Megan Rivers-Moore identifies in 'Waiting for the State: Sex work and the neoliberal governance of sexuality'.<sup>6</sup> She argues that the regulation of sex work ranges from a repressive mode of control, in which the state reaches out to capture and contain all sex workers, to a neoliberal mode of management, wherein the state withdraws, leaving individual sex workers to reach out for state services, such as healthcare and police protection. Analysing Costa Rica, Rivers-Moore describes an approach in which the state generally ignores sex work, except when conducting raids specifically targeting migrant sex workers. The UK's anti-trafficking agenda ended decades of state tolerance toward indoor sex work and shifted to proactive policing. In this repressive mode, law enforcement reaches out to capture traffickers and trafficking victims, defining anti-trafficking operations as crime control measures to intercept transnational criminal networks. As Julia O'Connell Davidson observes,

This not only makes it possible for governments to present measures to prevent irregular forms of migration as though they were simultaneously anti-trafficking measures, but also means that the authorities charged with a responsibility to contain illegal migration and combat organized crime are simultaneously deemed to be frontline actors as regards rescuing [victims of trafficking].<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> M Rivers-Moore, 'Waiting for the State: Sex work and the neoliberal governance of sexuality', *Social Politics: International studies in gender, state and society*, vol. 21, issue 3, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> J O'Connell Davidson, 'Will the Real Sex Slave Please Stand Up?', *Feminist Review*, vol. 83, 2006, p. 10.

The most spectacular instance of the UK's repressive mode of control was the police-led, multi-agency anti-trafficking mission, Pentameter 2. Beginning in 2007, this mission coordinated 55 police forces and raided 822 premises across the UK and Republic of Ireland. But Pentameter 2, like the Cuddles raid, had a dismal result. The mission led to the conviction of 15 men and women for trafficking offences, including ten people convicted without evidence they coerced women into prostitution, and the five convicted of using force were all detected by investigations preceding Pentameter 2. In a *Guardian* exposé, journalist Nick Davies revealed Pentameter 2's outcome: 'The UK's biggest ever investigation of sex trafficking failed to find a single person who had forced anybody into prostitution in spite of hundreds of raids on sex workers in a six-month campaign'.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith deemed the policing mission 'a great success'.<sup>9</sup>

The West Midlands police raid on Cuddles massage parlour foreshadowed the fanfare and failure of Pentameter 2. Police raids, and their official representation, reproduce the master narrative of trafficking, thereby reframing the discrimination and rights violations women experience under the repressive mode of control. The Cuddles raid is a pivotal moment in the rise of the UK's anti-trafficking agenda and a prime example of how the police and media spread the master narrative of trafficking in the mid-2000s.

## Establishing the Master Narrative

Stuart Hall et al. analyse the power of the state and media to produce potent narratives of crime. In *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, they argue that the relationship between mainstream media and institutional definers, such as the Home Office and police, permits 'institutional definers to establish the initial definition or *primary interpretation* of the topic in question. The interpretation then "commands the field" in all subsequent treatment and sets the terms of reference against which all further coverage or debate takes place'.<sup>10</sup> With trafficking

<sup>8</sup> N Davies, 'Inquiry fails to find single trafficker who forced anyone into prostitution,' *Guardian*, 19 October 2009.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> S Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order*, Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., New York, 1978, p. 58. Original emphasis.

as the topic in question, West Midlands police defined the crime by providing the public with arresting visuals and a narrative frame, establishing the primary interpretation that the Cuddles raid was a successful state action against trafficking in the sex industry. Conducting the raid and framing it, police set the terms of reference for trafficking and introduced key actors in this unfolding crime drama: state agents, victims and criminals. The primary interpretation of the Cuddles raid commanded the field, even after police decided no one had been trafficked.

Reviewing anti-trafficking awareness campaigns, Rutvica Andrijasevic details a ‘representation of trafficking organized around the dichotomy of victims and criminals’.<sup>11</sup> This article extends Andrijasevic’s analysis to include a third party—state agents—that mediates the dichotomy of victims and criminals. Raids personify the master narrative of trafficking by casting state agents in the role of saviours rescuing victims from criminals. In this way, raids tell a moral story that excites a desire to resolve a conflict between good and evil by establishing audience expectations that the police will stop the traffickers and save the girl(s). The UK’s narrative represents Eastern European women as victims that traffickers exploit and police extract from sexual exploitation. In this triangulated relationship, victims are positioned as objects of state power, at once over-exposed and concealed through the raid’s live enactment of the master narrative. Women taken up in raids cannot refuse police orders, resist arrest and detention or stop the media from taking photographs. In this profoundly disempowering situation, the police and media objectify women in order to publicise state action against trafficking. Police raids and public awareness campaigns both serve the pedagogical function of defining trafficking for the public via a dramatic display claimed to explain and exhibit evidence of this crime. The critical difference between trafficking raids and public awareness campaigns, however, is that raids use real people to stage the master narrative.

As Wendy S. Hesford writes regarding creating visibility for the issue of trafficking, ‘Women and girls in the sex industry not only become instruments of pathos but also evidence—proof—of the need for antitrafficking agencies and policies’.<sup>12</sup> Raids function as a form of

<sup>11</sup> R Andrijasevic, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, 2007, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> W Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human rights visions, recognitions, feminisms*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011, p. 130.

persuasion and a spectacular performance of state power that purport to show evidence of trafficking and the need for proactive policing. Claiming to provide proof of trafficking, police and media represent migrant women as signs of sexual oppression and state liberation. Drawing on data from India, Aziza Ahmed and Meena Seshu explain that raid narratives typically conclude when state agents capture victims, without following what happens to women after rescue:

The commonly told trope of the rescued woman ends here—she is now in the safe hands of the state or an NGO who will rehabilitate her, find her a new source of employment, and at some point release her from the rehabilitation home. In reality, this is not the way the story typically ends. Often, sex workers are taken into rehabilitation programmes where they are kept in jail-like conditions, may experience abuse, and then are eventually released.<sup>13</sup>

Focussing on the moment of women's liberation obscures these realities. Research indicates that raids cause fear among sex workers and can push them to work clandestinely to avoid detection. Interviewing migrant sex workers in London, Nicola Mai found that 'most feared a visit by anti-trafficking saviours more than coping with the people who enabled them to come and work in the UK, even when their relationships were far from ideal'.<sup>14</sup> Research participants in the United States told Melissa Ditmore and Juhu Thukral:

[R]aids were chaotic and often traumatic events which left them frightened and confused, with no sense of what was happening or could happen to them. They made it clear that they did not understand who was conducting the raid (other than government agents), what its purpose was (other than to arrest and deport them), or what the outcome might be.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> A Ahmed and M Seshu, "'We Have the Right Not to be 'Rescued'...': When anti-trafficking programmes undermine the health and well-being of sex workers', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 1, 2012, p. 155—6.

<sup>14</sup> N Mai, 'Embodied Cosmopolitanisms: The subjective mobility of migrants working in the global sex industry', *Gender, Place & Culture: A journal of feminist geography*, vol. 20, issue 1, 2013, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> M Ditmore and J Thukral, 'Accountability and the Use of Raids to Fight Trafficking', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 1, 2012, p. 141.



Sex workers captured in raids in Costa Rica are rarely deported; Rivers-Moore argues that raids therefore give the impression of ‘doing something about the presence of foreigners and ... that the state is serious about securing its borders, while simultaneously allowing the sale of sex to flourish’.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, as the Cuddles case confirms, the UK deports migrant women captured in raids and detains women with UK and EU documentation. According to the x:talk project, a UK sex worker rights network, raids signal ‘an unprecedented incursion into the lives and work of people employed in the indoor sex industry’.<sup>17</sup>

Research on raids in diverse countries indicates this tactic of repression causes harm and creates rights violations before, during and after the event. Sex workers fear raids, experience trauma during raids and endure myriad harms in the aftermath of raids, which can include interrogation, detention, prosecution and deportation. Media coverage exacerbates negative effects by exposing women to public scrutiny and associating them with stigmatized activities, such as prostitution, illegal migration and trafficking. Whether women are labelled sex workers or trafficking victims, this publicity constitutes considerable reputational risk and a serious violation of privacy. Yet the Cuddles raid, which aimed to show proof of ‘real life sex slaves’, disseminated the UK’s master narrative and defined the crime as a sexual traffic in white women from Eastern Europe. In the next three sections, I focus on the Cuddles raid and its aftermath to analyse how the police and media represented the event. This analysis highlights the use of discriminatory practices against women and contends that publicised raids prioritise the spectacle of the master narrative over women’s rights.

## How to Stage a Raid: Protecting victims by violating privacy

Detective Inspector Nevitt’s reference to sending in female officers to shield ‘half-dressed ladies’ from the gaze of male officers not only overlooks the fact that the men already saw the women on earlier occasions during the undercover investigation, but ignores that millions of people in Britain and beyond would view the women via media coverage. In other words, Nevitt’s claim to protect women from the gaze

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<sup>16</sup> Rivers-Moore, p. 421.

<sup>17</sup> x:talk project, ‘Human Rights, Sex Work and the Challenge of Trafficking: Human rights impact assessment of anti-trafficking policy in the UK’, 2010, p. 12.

of male officers fails to acknowledge the problem with, and harm of, presenting women to the media's gaze. While expressing concern about exposing the women, Nevitt does not admit to the danger of media exposure or the fact that the police facilitated it by calling reporters to the event.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Nevitt disregards the harm women experience during raids that, by design, employ overwhelming numbers of police and spectacular displays of force to subdue targets.

In addition to storming the building, West Midlands police employed a tactic that resembles a much-maligned US practice: the 'perp walk'. Perp (or perpetrator) walks occur when people in police custody are forced to walk through a public space, usually to the police station or court, for the benefit of the media. American police and media coordinate to create these image events, which are made for public consumption. The 'perp walk' is not an accepted practice in the UK or Europe because it violates the right to privacy, threatens the presumption of innocence and humiliates people accused, but not convicted, of a crime. In the now infamous example, France roundly condemned Dominique Strauss-Kahn's 'perp walk' after his arrest in 2011 on charges of sexually assaulting a hotel maid in New York.<sup>19</sup> Police moving women from Cuddles in front of the media can be said to differ from a 'perp walk' because the women are framed as 'sex slaves'. But this point underscores the porous borders between people suspected of being traffickers or of being trafficking victims and how both are subjected to state power once captured through police raids.

That police thought the women were trafficking victims raises questions about the rationale for presenting them to the media. Publicly associating women with criminalised prostitution, as sex workers or as trafficking victims, threatens reputational 'innocence' as well as violating the right to privacy. If they are trafficking victims, forcing them to face the media is an unconscionable state action. If they are sex workers working illegally in a brothel, then the UK, under the guise of its anti-trafficking agenda, is in fact conducting 'perp walks'. By contrast, people accused of crimes were protected from the media's gaze—no images circulated of police

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<sup>18</sup> I interpret DI Nevitt's claim as expressing concern about the women's privacy. His comment, however, could be read the other way: that is, as expressing concern about the effects on male officers of seeing 'half-dressed ladies'.

<sup>19</sup> S Sayare, M de La Baume and R Mackey, 'French shocked by I.M.F. chief's "perp walk"', *The New York Times*, 16 May 2011.

apprehending the owner or managers of Cuddles—yet police enabled publication of victim photographs. Coverage of the Cuddles raid in media outlets such as the *BBC*, *Telegraph* and *Guardian*, both in print and online, guarantees global circulation of these images and makes women's exposure a continuous threat. What can be termed 'victim walks', or 'prostitute walks', occur in the UK because British police and media are producing these image events. We therefore have a situation in which law enforcement respects the privacy rights of people suspected of trafficking as it presents women thought to be trafficking victims to the media.<sup>20</sup>

The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CEC), which opened for signature before the Cuddles raid in 2005, contains Article 11, Protection of Private Life. It specifies that countries should encourage the media to protect victim privacy and identity. The CEC states:

Each party shall consider adopting, in accordance with Article 10 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms as interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights, measures aimed at encouraging the media to protect the private life and identity of victims through self-regulation or through regulatory or co-regulatory measures.<sup>21</sup>

In 2009, the UK brought the CEC into force. In 2013, however, the Metropolitan police invited the media to a series of raids on Soho. Writing a *Guardian* opinion piece under the pseudonym Molly Smith, a sex worker and activist recounts,

Sex workers in London's Soho had their doors kicked in by riot police last week. The cops brought along journalists to photograph cowering women who were desperately trying to cover their faces. These images were splashed across the press.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I am not arguing that the police should correct the double standard I have identified by enacting 'perp walks' of persons accused of crimes, but contending that victims' right to privacy be likewise respected.

<sup>21</sup> Council of Europe, Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, No. 197, Warsaw, 16.05.2005, Article 11.3.

<sup>22</sup> M Smith, 'Soho police raids show why sex workers live in fear of being "rescued"', *Guardian*, 11 December 2013.

Smith also details the raid's aftermath, which did not appear elsewhere in mainstream media:

Working flats have now been closed, throwing women out on to the street. Some, who were migrant workers, were taken away by police for compulsory 'counselling,' detention at Heathrow, and enforced removal from the UK, despite protesting that they were not trafficked victims: they are migrant sex workers—indeed, several of the women currently incarcerated at Heathrow are active within the English Collective of Prostitutes, a sex-worker rights organisation that, along with the Sex Worker Open University, is protesting against the raids.<sup>23</sup>

As these raids suggest, police continue to solicit the media to promote the repressive mode of controlling sex work and, in so doing, continue to violate women's rights, including to privacy. The master narrative frames this state action positively, but its story of good versus evil crumbles under scrutiny of both the humiliation of women and their subsequent treatment by the state.

## Challenging the Master Narrative

Media photographs of the Cuddles raid reveal a striking resemblance between policing tactics and the crime of trafficking. The raid photographs show police officers flanking the women from Cuddles. The master narrative depicts this physical arrangement as police protection, but reading the raid against the official interpretation suggests that officers are physically barring the women from escaping police custody. In one photograph, a female officer, wearing a black uniform and blue latex gloves, has her arms around the woman she moves toward the police vans. The women are close enough to be in physical contact, yet the master narrative positions them as worlds apart. Analysing the trafficking victim stereotype, Andrijasevic avers, 'while Eastern European women are likely to be white and hence racially not immediately distinguishable from Western European women, it is precisely the stereotype's separating function that draws a line between these two groupings'.<sup>24</sup> The master

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> R Andrijasevic, 'The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation', *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, M Evans et al. (eds.), Sage Publications, London, 2014, p. 366.

narrative represents Eastern European women as exploited and then extracted from sexual exploitation; in contrast, British women are represented as anti-trafficking saviours that the state empowers to save Eastern European victims.

Undermining this stark dichotomy is the fact that the ‘trafficking victims’ and female officers look like each other: all are young, most are white. Given the physical resemblance, clothes are the main visual signifiers differentiating these two groupings. Black uniforms and blue gloves identify some women as police officers, while ‘trafficking victims’ wear casual clothes: black shirt, pink jacket, blue top. The distinction between ‘trafficking victims’ and female officers would disappear if the latter group were dressed in plainclothes. The raid photographs at once enhance and erase difference by revealing that, without the distinction of dress, policewoman and prostitute are indistinguishable. Given that dangerously close proximity, the master narrative reproduces the separating function and dichotomous relation between state agents and migrant women while the state’s repressive mode of control enacts the subordination of sex workers.

Despite the police interpretation that they discovered trafficking victims in Cuddles because they detected migrant women working there, the women are not identifiable as victims at first glance. This point is important in relation to anti-trafficking public awareness campaigns, such as Blue Blindfold from 2008, which instruct Britons to ‘Open Your Eyes to Human Trafficking’ in the UK. Unlike migration from Britain’s former colonies, in which the UK racialised difference on black/white and coloured/white binaries, with the arrival of migrants resembling white Britons, the state steps in to teach the public whom it should be watching and reporting to the police. As discussed above, police raids and public awareness campaigns share the pedagogical function of explaining and exhibiting the key actors in the crime of human trafficking.

Although police raids operate on the premise that they make the invisible visible—exposing the hidden world of trafficking—the Cuddles raid in effect renders the *visible invisible*. That is, the police raid hides the repression of sex workers in plain sight by showing it, but framing it as the rescue of ‘sex slaves’. Raids appear to produce happy endings, displaying the climactic moment of women’s liberation, but it is through narrative closure that they cloak discrimination against sex workers and the repressive mode of control. Through representational foreclosure, women’s experiences of harm and rights violations vanish from view.

## Rescue Aftermath: The victims of operation strikeout

Most of the women captured in the Cuddles raid held EU passports and were legally residing in the UK. Six of the women had migrated from outside the EU. All of the women were working illegally because British law permits the sale of sex only when women work indoors and alone, making street solicitation and brothel work illegal.<sup>25</sup> After the raid, thirteen EU women were held in prison cells for two nights, but the six non-EU women were separated from them and taken to Yarl's Wood detention centre.<sup>26</sup> As O'Connell Davidson notes, 'The six who could not prove they were legally present in the country were detained and asked, in interviews conducted by male officers and lasting in some cases a mere 17 minutes, how they had travelled to the UK and how they came to be working in Cuddles'.<sup>27</sup> A *BBC* article reported, 'Thirteen of the women freed from Cuddles on Thursday night were released without charge by police'.<sup>28</sup> The blurred narratives of liberation ('freed from Cuddles') and criminalisation ('released without charge') indicate the confusion about whether the police raid was a prostitution bust or an anti-trafficking operation. Human rights and sex worker rights groups secured for the women the thirty-day 'recovery and reflection' period usually reserved for trafficking victims. The *BBC* article quotes the Home Office confirming the deportation postponement 'does not mean that the Immigration Service will not pursue the removal of individuals in the future when it is deemed appropriate to do so'.<sup>29</sup> The women were eventually deported.

Once police decide women without EU citizenship are not trafficking victims, the UK Border Agency can initiate deportation proceedings. Police made the determination of victim status in this case, but the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for identifying trafficking victims is also rife with problems in process and discretion. The Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group (ATMG), which formed in 2009 to coincide with the

<sup>25</sup> As I argue elsewhere, the UK permits only the least visible form of sex work. A Hill, 'Demanding Victims: The sympathetic shift in British prostitution policy', in C R Showden and S Majic (eds.), *Negotiating Sex Work*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2014, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> Yarl's Wood detains women and children and the UK has no set time limit on detention. There have been allegations that guards sexually abused detainees and repeated calls to close the detention centre. D Taylor, 'Dossier calling for Yarl's Wood closure chronicles decade of abuse complaints', *Guardian*, 15 June 2015.

<sup>27</sup> O'Connell Davidson, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> *BBC*, "'Brothel' workers to remain in UK", 4 October 2005.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

CEC's entry into force, assesses the implementation of the treaty because the British government refused to have independent audits or a rapporteur. The ATMG reviewed NRM decisions by the UK Border Agency and the UK Human Trafficking Centre and found that the distribution of positive conclusive decisions and nationality showed a skew: non-EU claimants were less likely to be recognised as trafficking victims.<sup>30</sup> Also analysing the NRM, Abigail Stepnitz concludes, 'Within the overall UK approach to human trafficking lies a stratified and often discriminatory system, largely reliant on rhetoric and practice taken from responses to immigration'.<sup>31</sup>

In the Cuddles case, deportations would have occurred without media attention except that the 'sex slaves' story had alerted human rights and sex worker rights groups to the police raid. These groups challenged the master narrative of trafficking by criticising official representations of the raid and demanding coverage after the moment of rescue. Speaking for Amnesty International UK, Sarah Green told the *Birmingham Post*:

The police undoubtedly designed this story as antitrafficking. But if that is the case why are these women with the immigration service because it has nothing at all to do with trafficking. As these women are now out of the hands of police, they have no status in law because they are classed as purely illegal immigrants.<sup>32</sup>

The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) argued the women were victims of overzealous policing and accused police of conducting the raid to create a media-friendly trafficking bust. The ECP resisted the master narrative of trafficking by giving the media an alternative account of the event: this liberation story was ending with the forced removal of women from the UK.

In *Policing the Crisis*, Hall et al. state, 'arguments *against* a primary interpretation are forced to insert themselves into *its* definition of "what is at issue"—they must begin from this framework of interpretation as their starting-point'.<sup>33</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that NGO attempts to

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<sup>30</sup> Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, 'Wrong Kind of Victim? One year on: An analysis of UK measures to protect trafficked persons', June 2010.

<sup>31</sup> A Stepnitz, "'A Lie More Disastrous than the Truth': Asylum and the identification of trafficked women in the UK', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 1, 2012, p. 105.

<sup>32</sup> N Connor, 'Cuddles "victims" held', *Birmingham Post*, 6 October 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Hall et al., p. 58. Original emphasis.

reframe the Cuddles raid failed to replace the master narrative of trafficking with accounts of the state's capture, detention and deportation of women. Moreover, the media never addressed the part it played in violating women's privacy by publishing photographs with erroneous and triumphalist headlines. Women who do not conform to the master narrative rarely appear in media accounts (unlike those featured in the BBC's web portal, *Slavery in Modern England*). Thus the public was less informed about the raid's aftermath, and the initial splash of raid coverage created the most widespread impression. Finally, while police court publicity for raids, the state does not publicise what happens after the enforcement action. Coverage of the Cuddles raid aftermath occurred due to human rights and sex worker rights groups advocating for the detained women.

It is evident that a gap exists between the practice of labelling women 'sex slaves' in the media and the narrow parameters through which state agencies actually accord that status. On the one hand, publicising anti-trafficking raids persuades the public that trafficking is a huge, hidden problem and police are tackling it. On the other hand, the UK Border Agency and UK Human Trafficking Centre do not grant victim status without first investigating because that designation comes with rights and protections that the state is legally bound to honour. The police and media can quickly disseminate a trafficking story that reaches the public, but the slower machinations of victim identification may arrive at a different conclusion.

Varying levels of publicity, wherein raids garner copious media coverage but legal processes and victim outcomes are often hidden from view, allow the master narrative of trafficking to stand as the public record. The *Guardian* exposé about Pentameter 2 depended on Nick Davies' pursuit of a confidential government report acquired after what he describes as 'a lengthy legal struggle'.<sup>34</sup> The report contradicted government representations of Pentameter 2 as a successful mission and put into question claims about trafficking invading the UK. Official claims and

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<sup>34</sup> Davies, 2009. Nick Davies' report demonstrates the ability of the media to investigate, rather than simply repeat, government and police claims about crime.



their publication in the media suggest a troubling tendency: women are publicly presented as trafficking victims when it benefits the state, but when that status empowers women by affording them rights and protections, the designation is much harder to obtain.

## Conclusion

After media reports announcing a successful raid, the criminal case against Cuddles' owner and the two managers received less attention. The criminal charges are significant, however, because indoor sex work had been largely tolerated before the rise of the anti-trafficking agenda. In fact, Cuddles' owner was charged with running a brothel from 1998 to 2005, indicating his business operated for seven years before the raid. Police left it alone until the state approach to sex work shifted to reaching out in a repressive mode. In the end, the Cuddles case resulted in multiple deportations and brothel-keeping convictions, but nothing like the capture of traffickers in a sex slave story. The owner was imprisoned for less than a year and Cuddles reopened in 2006.<sup>35</sup> These significant details were likewise underreported.

As the raid on Cuddles and its aftermath show, West Midlands police publicised the UK's anti-trafficking agenda at the expense of vulnerable women, and the women were clearly vulnerable to police repression and media invasion of privacy, as well as to anti-trafficking policy. Reacting to the Soho raids eight years after Cuddles, a sex worker and activist using the pseudonym Mitzi Poesener argues,

Sex workers are vulnerable because their work is not afforded the same respect and access to safe working spaces that others are. By punishing them for working together in brothels to ensure their safety, and taking them into custody on the off chance they might be trafficked (presumably in order to make a large scale police operation seem more effective), the police show that their concerns over safety may not be as altruistic as first stated.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> G Marks, 'Cuddles in comeback: Massage parlour reopens one year on', *Birmingham Mail*, 16 October 2006.

<sup>36</sup> M Poesener, 'What Motivated the Raids on Sex Workers in Soho?', *Feministing*, 10 December 2013.

Through Cuddles, the media got a ‘sex slave’ story and police received ample publicity to frame the problem of trafficking. That framing located rights violations in the trafficking scenario only, effectively shielding state agents from accusations of coercion, entrapment, detention and forced movement. One conclusion that can be drawn from the Cuddles raid is that presenting women to the media against their will exposes not the horror of trafficking, but a horrifying disregard for their rights. The media and public should not simply accept that police raids demonstrate victim protection. Raids are dramatic, and traumatic, events that incite a cascade of consequences that cause serious and sustained harm to people they purport to rescue. Raids serve the interests of the state, rather than the victims they produce.

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# Neoliberal Sexual Humanitarianism and Story-Telling: The case of Somaly Mam

Heidi Hoefinger

## Abstract

Stories of trafficking into the sex industry in Cambodia are a popular feature in local and international media, academic and development literature, policy and humanitarian debates, social and political discourse, and NGO interventions. These stories are powerful for their ability to evoke deep emotions and outrage from their intended audiences. However, they are equally powerful for the ways in which they can cause harm—namely to already marginalised populations of migrants and people involved in the sex trade either by choice, circumstance or coercion. One of the most contentious contemporary trafficking stories is that of the controversial case of Somaly Mam—the self-declared ‘sex slave’ turned ‘modern-day hero’. This paper outlines Mam’s prolific trajectory of self-representation according to the tropes of sexual humanitarianism and argues that these narratives helped to set in motion one of the most lucrative, and in many ways, most exploitative and problematic anti-trafficking endeavours in Cambodia, to date. The paper concludes with offering suggestions for how the anti-trafficking industry might better address real cases of trafficking and exploitation by focusing on structural violence and systemic injustice rather than on sensationalised humanitarian rhetoric, which can perpetuate harms.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, Somaly Mam, sex work, sexual humanitarianism, anti-trafficking industrial complex

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Lurid stories of trafficking into the sex industry in Cambodia abound. They are a prevalent feature of both local and international news media, television and films, of academic and development literature, of policy and humanitarian debates, of social and political discourse, and of NGO interventions. The images are disturbing, yet enticing: young female ‘sex slaves’ locked in brothels, or even cages; regular, violent abuse by pimps and managers; or the systematic sale of child or adolescent virginity by family members. These stories are powerful for their ability to evoke deep emotions and outrage from their intended audiences. Rarely critically assessed by the viewers, however, the narratives are equally powerful for the ways in which they can cause harm—namely to labour migrants and already marginalised populations of people involved in the sex trade either by choice, circumstance or coercion. No greater and more prolific a contemporary ‘trafficking story’ is that of the controversial case of Somaly Mam, a self-proclaimed ‘survivor of the Cambodian slave trade’.<sup>2</sup>

This article contextualises Mam’s story within Cambodian history and argues that narratives of trafficking into the sex industry expedited the setting in motion of one of the most exploitative and problematic anti-trafficking endeavours in Cambodia to date. The paper will draw on Mai’s idea of ‘sexual humanitarianism’ as a global and repressive form of social and moral governance that is activated through the production of moral panics around sexual behaviour (in this case trafficking in the sex industry), and that is used to show the inseparability between neoliberalism and development aid in post-1991 Cambodia. The article will explore the relation between sexual humanitarianism and neoliberalism by building on Leigh’s notion of the ‘anti-trafficking industrial complex’ referring to the systems and institutions operating under the banner of anti-trafficking initiatives, which create economic opportunities for the organisations involved in eradicating trafficking through punitive means while exacerbating the socio-economic vulnerabilities of sex workers.

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Nicola Mai, Rutvica Andrijasevic, Rebecca Napier-Moore, Carol Leigh, and two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful feedback and comments on this article.

<sup>2</sup> Somaly Mam Foundation, ‘Somaly Mam Foundation Annual Report’, Somaly Mam Foundation, New York, 2011.

## Self-Representation

Mam's story is one that has both inspired and shaken the global anti-trafficking movement, and it begins in Cambodia. As painstakingly detailed in her memoir, *The Road of Lost Innocence*,<sup>3</sup> Mam describes her own life of violence, rape and torture, and years of enslavement by various abusive men after being orphaned as a child in the Cambodian countryside. The images are vivid and painful, and drawing on the standard narrative of extreme control and exploitation typical of the patriarchal repertoire of Western representations of 'sexual slavery',<sup>4</sup> the autobiography virtually projected Mam onto the world as the beautifully damaged, global anti-trafficking 'poster child'.<sup>5</sup>

Mam's anti-trafficking work actually began a decade before her book's publication alongside her French ex-husband, Pierre Legros, when, in 1996, they co-founded AFESIP (Agir Pour Les Femmes en Situation Précaire, or Helping Women in Danger)—a Cambodian-based NGO devoted to 'saving' women and children from sexual exploitation. The international media first took interest in their work in 1998 when a French television show, *Envoyé Spécial*, aired a compelling story about child sexual exploitation in Cambodia, featuring graphic on-camera testimonies of an 'enslaved' young girl named Meas Ratha with Mam seated by her side.<sup>6</sup>

After this first public media appeal, Mam was soon touring the world as an ambassador and activist for anti-trafficking. In 2007, she went on to start the New York-based Somaly Mam Foundation (SMF), which became the global fundraising arm of her work. The 'eradication of slavery' was one SMF's key objectives. In the 2011 *Somaly Mam Foundation Annual Report*, SMF, through the efforts of AFESIP, boasted of rescuing 30 victims from Cambodian brothels, of airing the national radio show *Somaly's Family* five days per week in Cambodia, of offering 668 sexually transmitted

<sup>3</sup> Originally published in French as *Le silence de l'innocence*, Editions Anne Carrière, Paris, 2005. The first English translation was *The Road of Lost Innocence: The true story of a Cambodian childhood*, Virago Press, London, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> R Andrijasevic, 'Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns', *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, 2007, pp. 24–44.

<sup>5</sup> E O'Brien, 'Ideal Victims in Human Trafficking Awareness Campaigns', in K Carrington, M Ball, E O'Brien, and JM Tauri (eds.), *Crime, Justice and Social Democracy: International perspectives*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2013, pp. 315–326.

<sup>6</sup> S Marks and P Bopha, 'Sex slave story revealed to be fabricated', *Cambodia Daily*, 12 October 2013.

disease tests to ‘victims of exploitation in the sex trade’, and of reintegrating 120 survivors back into the community. According to AFESIP’s current website, the three AFESIP centres in Cambodia are presently helping 170 women and girls who are ‘victimized by human trafficking and sex slavery’. While these are all perhaps commendable achievements, these numbers do not seem to add up to the 4,000 victims Mam regularly claims to have ‘rescued’ to date.<sup>7</sup> The numbers seem even less impressive when the total revenue for SMF in 2011—well over USD2 million—is considered (which was mostly gained through supporter contributions).<sup>8</sup>

In an attempt to keep the momentum going, and portray to the world harrowing first-hand accounts of child sexual abuse in order to drum up funding, Mam also mobilised the victim script of Long Pros—a teenage Cambodian girl who, while imprisoned in a brothel, allegedly had her eye gouged out by an angry manager when she refused to have sex with clients after an abortion.<sup>9</sup>

The narrative was gripping and both Mam and Pros shared the story on the *Oprah Winfrey* show in the US while on a celebrity tour, where they shared stages with Hilary Clinton, Meg Ryan and Susan Sarandon, to name a few. Journalist Nicholas Kristof jumped on the bandwagon and published Pros’ story in the *New York Times*,<sup>10</sup> as well as in a 2012 PBS documentary titled *Half the Sky* (which was based on a book by the same name co-authored with Sheryl WuDunn in 2009).<sup>11</sup> In 2011, Mam and Kristof strengthened their alliance during an infamous brothel raid in which Kristof broadcast his ‘bravery’ to the world through a series of 15 live *Twitter* messages shared with his 1.3 million followers.<sup>12</sup> (This is after Kristof had purchased two Cambodian sex workers from a brothel for USD353 in 2004 with the goal of ‘setting them free’).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Voice of America, ‘AFESIP offers new start for abused girls’, *Voice of America - Khmer*, 26 February 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Somaly Mam Foundation, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> S Marks and K Sovuthy, ‘Questions raised over symbol’s slavery story’, *Cambodia Daily*, 26 October 2012.

<sup>10</sup> N Kristof, ‘If this isn’t slavery, what is?’, *New York Times*, 3 January 2009.

<sup>11</sup> The book and film went on to be branded as the *Half the Sky* movement, in which Kristof profits from the economic and physical oppression of young women and girls all over the global South, while advancing his ‘white hero’ complex. See [www.halftheskymovement.org](http://www.halftheskymovement.org).

<sup>12</sup> See ‘Nick Kristof Live-tweets a Brothel Raid’, retrieved 8 July 2016, <https://storify.com/twittermedia/nick-kristof-live-tweets-a-brothel-raid>

<sup>13</sup> N Kristof, ‘Bargaining for freedom’, *New York Times*, 21 January 2004.

In the introduction to the Cambodia segment of the *Half the Sky* film, Mam proclaims herself to be the ‘mother and the grandmother to all the suffering girls who have been sex slaves in Cambodia’. Then a few clips later, to the tune of *We Are the World* in the background, Kristof and Mam are shown heroically raiding brothels alongside machine-gun armed police. Images of bloodied toilet paper dumped from a garbage bag and stained pillows on a bed are followed by a clip of Mam holding an allegedly raped and sold three-year-old girl.



Image 1: Somaly Mam holding an alleged three-year old rape victim; *Half the Sky* film still. Photo Credit: Independent Lens, PBS

With Mam narrating, slides of statistics then state that there are 57,000 sex slaves in Cambodia alone; that the average starting age of sex slavery decreased from age 15 in 1993 to age 2 in 2013; that 2.4 million girls are forced into sexual slavery (the timeframe and location unclear); and that 40-50% of sex slaves are HIV positive (location again unclear). At no point are the sources of these dubious and exaggerated statistics cited.<sup>14</sup>

The wounded character of Long Pros depicted the perfect ‘true victim’<sup>15</sup>—already historically and culturally coded as female, unfree, and the passive object of male violence.<sup>16</sup> The film itself is a clear example of a cinematic genre of what anthropologist Carol Vance has termed ‘melomentary’ whereby the ‘horror of sex is amplified by the horror of poverty’.<sup>17</sup> Viewers need not know the true context of bloodied toilet paper (perhaps evidence of menstrual blood), or worn bedding (perhaps evidence of poverty-stricken living conditions); they are already convinced that both are proof of sex trafficking, and that the ‘true’ victims in the film are worthy of Mam’s (and Kristof’s) sexual humanitarian interventions.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> According to a UNIAP report published in 2011, for example, there were 1,058 trafficking victims in Cambodia, and 127 were underage—significantly lower than the 57,000 cited in the film. See UNIAP, *UNIAP Trafficking Estimates. Measuring the extent of sex trafficking in Cambodia—2008*, Bangkok, Thailand, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> A Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the war on welfare to the war on terror*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> R Andrijasevic, ‘The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation’, Chap. in M Evans, C Hemmings, M Henry, H Johnstone, S Madhok, A Plomien & S Wearing (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, London, Sage, 2014, pp. 359—73.

<sup>17</sup> C S Vance, ‘Innocence and Experience: Melodramatic narratives of sex trafficking and their consequences for law and policy’, *History of the Present*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2012, pp. 200—18.

<sup>18</sup> Mai, 2013.





Image 2: Meg Ryan and Long Pros in *Half the Sky*. Photo Credit: Independent Lens, PBS

Through the use of these heart-wrenching trafficking scripts, Somaly Mam had catapulted herself into the global spotlight as a brave and beautiful freedom fighter, and earned honours such as the Prince Asturias Award for International Cooperation in 1998, Glamour Magazine's 'Woman of the Year' Award in 2006, the US State Department's 'TIP Report Hero' title in 2007, Time Magazine's 'Most Influential People' recognition in 2009, the USD1.27 million Roland Berger Human Dignity Award in 2009, Fortune Magazine's 'Most Powerful Women' recognition in 2011, a CNN Freedom Project hero in 2011, one of Fast Company's League of Extraordinary Women in 2012, the Posco TJ Park Foundation Community Development & Philanthropy Prize in 2012, and the Nomura CARES Award in 2012.

Mam has had meetings and encounters with Pope John Paul II, the Dalai Lama, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and boasts support from Queen Sofía of Spain, Angelina Jolie, Lucy Liu, Ashley Judd, Bonnie Rait, Jane Seymour, Katie Couric, Bill Maher and Shelley Simmons (the Body Shop). SMF had as advisory board members in 2011: Daryl Hannah, Laurie Holden, Ron Livingston, Susan Sarandon and Sheryl Sandberg (partial list). Through a combination of storytelling, networking, and performance, Mam became a million-dollar enterprise in her quest to 'free the slaves'.



Image 3: Katie Couric and Somaly Mam at a Somaly Mam Foundation Fundraiser;  
Photo Credit: Andy Kropa

### Context—Neoliberal sexual humanitarianism

Wendy Hesford's notion of 'spectacular rhetorics' is useful in analysing Mam's efficiency in touching on various humanitarian tropes or themes of suffering in an effort to shape how western spectators understand and uncritically support her form of human rights advocacy.<sup>19</sup> By compelling audiences to witness 'human rights spectacles' of trauma, exploitation, rape, and abuse, Mam has created a 'visual vernacular'—or visual culture which ultimately perpetuates violence (as described below), and crafts a discourse that affirms, rather than rhetorically engages with, oppressive power imbalances between the spectacles (in this case, Cambodian female trafficking victims) and the gazing spectators (western human rights advocates and donors).

These western viewers and 'holders of rights' have the power to bestow justice, benevolence, morality, and even freedom upon the powerless, victimised 'Other' through uncritical acts of charity, which is archetypal of Mam's brand of 'sexual humanitarianism'.<sup>20</sup> As defined by sociologist Nicola Mai, 'sexual humanitarianism' is a repressive form of social and moral governance that often emerges through the production of global

<sup>19</sup> Hesford, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Mai, 2013.

moral panics around sexual behaviour. Sexual humanitarianism, in the case of Mam, is activated through a strategy of self-representation and instances of humanitarian interventions that ‘attempt to recreate the notion of a unified, West-centric, hierarchical humanity around essentialised and moralised understandings of...gender and sexuality’.<sup>21</sup> With regard to Mam and Cambodia, there is a definitive relationship between sexual humanitarianism, neoliberalism, and globalisation—similar to anthropologist Don Kulick’s<sup>22</sup> renderings of the connection between the implementation of the Swedish Model (i.e. the criminalisation of clients of sex workers) and Sweden’s entry into the EU. Local Cambodian articulations of the encounter between sexual humanitarianism and neoliberalism lend themselves to the neoliberal form of sexual humanitarianism illustrated in this paper. Some historical context is necessary here in order to further elucidate this connection.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia suffered decades of conflict in the form of civil war, genocide under the Khmer Rouge regime, and Vietnamese occupation.<sup>23</sup> In a move towards reconciliation and liberalisation, the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1991, with the belief that peace (and, importantly, foreign investments) could be achieved through free markets and democratisation. The United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia took control from 1991 to 1993 (known as the UNTAC era), and in 1993, the first ‘democratic’ elections were held, whereby the current Prime Minister, Hun Sen, and his Cambodian People’s Party gained power (and have remained in power ever since). There were sharp increases in industrialisation, privatisation, expansion and rural to urban migration as the Cambodian government turned towards capitalism as a solution to 30 years of overwhelming violence and devastation. As Simon Springer points out, ‘neoliberalism’s

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> D Kulick, ‘Sex in the New Europe: The criminalization of clients and Swedish fear of penetration’, *Anthropological Theory*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2003, pp. 199–218. Here Kulick argues that the passing of the Swedish law had more to do with anxieties around Sweden’s entry into the EU and the potential wave of European liberalisation regarding prostitution that might occur when the country was literally and metaphorically ‘penetrated’ by Europeans (or more specifically—Eastern European sex workers). The fear was based in the notion that the country could potentially lose its ‘Swedishness’ and become vulnerable to moral contamination. Thus, measures were taken against prostitution, an obvious target, to attempt to maintain Sweden’s position that the ‘polity was politically more aware, humane, and moral than that of many other nations’ (p. 209).

<sup>23</sup> D Chandler, *A History of Cambodia, Third Edition*, Boulder, Westview Press, 2000.

relationship with “post conflict” development [and peace building] is an integral one’.<sup>24</sup>

During the UNTAC era, an estimated 20,000 UN international peacekeepers entered Cambodia, and many scholars associate this period with changes in social and sexual culture, and increases in sexual permissiveness and depravity, corruption, inflation, rape and assault, prostitution and the spread of HIV/AIDS—and trafficking—all apparently due to the sudden appearance of wealth and foreign influence.<sup>25</sup> And, as illustrated above, it was also during the 1990s that the link between ‘human trafficking’ (namely in the form of child sexual exploitation and prostitution) and Cambodia hit the global stage—through Mam’s endeavours and first TV appearance. In that ‘spectacular’ moment, she became the Cambodian face of the larger moralistic and sexual humanitarian project of addressing ‘sex trafficking’, as she metaphorically represented, on a global platform, the beauty, resiliency, and bravery of Cambodia, yet also its vulnerability. As the country was busy reorienting itself as modern, global, and progressive, in neoliberal terms, in its attempts to attract foreign investments and capitalist expansion, the state was, and still is, very much dependent on foreign aid for social programming (despite the fact that its reliance on donor money ultimately worked to undermine efforts at democracy).<sup>26</sup>

The work of historian Trude Jacobsen shows how sexual humanitarianism was, and is, acceptable to the government because it transfers responsibility away from the state and on to individual actors (and their resources). For Cambodian actors like Somaly Mam, it provided an opportunity to acquire resources through an issue that inflames first-world guilt (sex tourism, orientalism, the legacy of the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge). Non-Cambodian donors and activists gained prestige within their communities (church, friend group, families) for contributing (financially or through activism or other means) to a cause viewed as morally worthy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> S Springer, *Violent Neoliberalism—Development, discourse, and dispossession in Cambodia*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> T Jacobsen, *Lost Goddesses: The denial of female power in Cambodian history*, Gendering Asia, vol. 4, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> S Ear, *Aid Dependence in Cambodia: How foreign assistance undermines democracy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> T Jacobsen, email communication, 10 July 2016.

Within Mam's neoliberal brand of sexual humanitarianism, humanitarian interventions and market transactions are constructed as mutually reinforcing (rather than contradictory) modes of individualistic worldly engagement.<sup>28</sup> Essentialised and vulnerable victims of sexual oppression and exploitation are deemed entitled to protection and support,<sup>29</sup> yet the commercial objectives of seeking that support are cloaked in sanctimonious moral agendas and human rights language. NGOs are viewed as experts in knowledge production, the 'real' voices of the apparent victims are marginalised—if not completely ignored—and there is a commercialisation or celebrityisation of humanitarianism, whereby funds are raised through red carpet galas, celebrity endorsements, 'sex trafficking tours',<sup>30</sup> and the sale of victim-made products (where consumers are reminded they are 'buying for freedom').<sup>31</sup>

In this system, there is a flow of funds from more developed countries to charitable anti-trafficking projects in less developed countries in the form of celebrity, corporate and private donations. Often the donors have very little knowledge about the complexity of the issues they are supporting, and funnel money into 'worthy' organisations that lack transparency in both their activities and outcomes. In this context, 'Band-Aid solutions' tend to mask deeper systemic injustices<sup>32</sup> and short-term fixes supplant long-term structural change. Mass-mediated spectacles and 'victim scripts' are the only evidence needed to justify the cause, and west-centric, moralised understandings of sex and gender are reproduced around the globe.

## Mam's Story and Reactions to it

Basking in the celebrity fame and glory of her neoliberal sexual humanitarianism for nearly a decade, Mam's reign as global anti-trafficking hero came to a halt in May 2014 with the publication of a *Newsweek* story

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<sup>28</sup> E Bernstein and E Shih, 'The Erotics of Authenticity: Sex trafficking and "reality tourism" in Thailand', *Social Politics*, vol. 21, issue 3, 2014, p. 435.

<sup>29</sup> Mai, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> For an ethnographic case study of this, see Bernstein and Shih's (2014) analysis of sex trafficking 'reality tours' in Thailand.

<sup>31</sup> E Shih, 'The Anti-Trafficking Rehabilitation Complex', *Contexts*, vol. 13, issue 1, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> P Mahdavi, 'The charitable industrial complex: Justice, not charity, is what's needed', *Huffington Post*, 24 June 2014.

in which investigative journalist, Simon Marks (who, alongside Khmer colleagues, had been breaking small stories in local Cambodian media for several years), uncovered that most of her stories were allegedly fabricated.<sup>33</sup> Mam was not orphaned and sold into the sex trade as a child, but instead lived with both her biological parents throughout high school, before sitting the teachers exam (privileges that many girls do not have in Cambodia due to gendered inequities in education).

The publicised trauma stories of Mam's rescued 'sex slaves' were also allegedly untrue. Meas Ratha (from the 1998 French documentary) had apparently auditioned for the part and was chosen because she was the most convincing at performing misery. In exchange for the emotional performance, Ratha received education from Mam's organisation.<sup>34</sup> In 2012, Long Pros' parents revealed that her eye was not savagely maimed by a brothel manager, but instead was the result of a non-malignant tumour that had developed when she was age seven. At the suggestion of her surgeon, Pros' family contacted AFESIP to see if she could be admitted to their vocational training program. She was accepted, and her disfigurement soon launched her into the position of an ideal spokesperson for the Somaly Mam Foundation's Voices for Change programme, which was designed as a platform for survivors of sex trafficking to share their (fictional, in this case) stories.<sup>35</sup>

There were other falsehoods and exaggerations, including a story told in a speech at the UN General Assembly about eight girls Mam had rescued in a botched AFESIP brothel raid in 2004 who had apparently been murdered by the Cambodian army. In 2012, she admitted that this claim was false. And several sources, ranging from rights workers, to police officials, to AFESIP's former legal advisor, to her ex-husband, Pierre Legros, have all strongly denied Mam's claim on film in 2006 that her 14-year old daughter was kidnapped and gang-raped by traffickers, as retaliation for Mam's anti-trafficking work. Instead, her daughter had apparently run away with her boyfriend.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> S Marks, 'Somaly Mam: The holy saint (and sinner) of sex trafficking', *Newsweek*, 21 May 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Marks and Bopha, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Marks and Sovuthy, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Marks and Bopha, 2013.

The global reaction to these revelations of falsehoods was mixed. Many former supporters were saddened and dismayed. Across news and social media, there was a sense of disillusionment and betrayal at having been lied to. Even Kristof, her former rescue partner (and supporter of the Long Pros story), had back-pedalled and stated shortly after the scandal broke that he ‘now wished he had never written about her’.<sup>37</sup> But there also remained unfettered support. The many people invested in her tale (such as Susan Sarandon, AnnaLynne McCord, designer Diane von Furstenberg among some other of the celebrities listed above) simply refused to believe that she had exaggerated her story, while others argued that the fabrications did not invalidate her important anti-trafficking work.<sup>38</sup>

Days after the publication of the *Newsweek* article, SMF released a statement confirming that Mam was stepping down from the foundation after an independent investigation had been conducted by a California-based law firm, Goodwin Proctor. Four months later, SMF officially closed its doors.<sup>39</sup> Mam remained silent throughout all of this until an interview with *Marie Claire*, in which she vehemently denied the allegations against her. When asked why she remained silent for so long, Mam replied, in reference to ‘her girls’ in Cambodia, ‘I was not silent. I had so many lives to fix’.<sup>40</sup> And despite a statement by a Cambodian Council of Ministers spokesperson that the government would not allow Mam to ‘run this kind of activity again’,<sup>41</sup> it was announced in an email to her supporters in December 2014 that Mam would be involved in a new US-based organisation called The New Somaly Mam Fund: Voices of Change. The new NGO would combine with AFESIP (which lost most of its funding after SMF withdrew support after the scandal) and focus on post-rescue care and education.<sup>42</sup>

While The New Somaly Mam Fund continued to work to raise funds in the year following Mam’s public opprobrium, there was yet another shift in rebranding—perhaps due to a negative association with Mam’s name

<sup>37</sup> N Kristof, ‘When sources may have lied’, *New York Times*, 7 June 2014.

<sup>38</sup> M Siegler, ‘AnnaLynne McCord supports Somaly Mam’s new charity’, *Page Six*, 14 March 2015.

<sup>39</sup> M O’Neil, ‘Somaly Mam Foundation Shuttters Operations’, *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 14 October 2014.

<sup>40</sup> A Pesta, ‘Somaly Mam’s story: I didn’t lie’, *Marie Claire*, 16 September 2014.

<sup>41</sup> H Robertson and K Naren, ‘Gov’t says Somaly Mam banned from running NGO’, *Cambodia Daily*, 3 October 2014.

<sup>42</sup> L Barron, ‘Somaly Mam Foundation 2.0’, *Phnom Penh Post*, 26 December 2014.

within the fundraising world of sexual humanitarianism. On 25 June 2016, at the Sofitel in Beverly Hills, California, the new, media-oriented and celebrity-endorsed Together1Heart organisation was launched—which has now replaced The New Somaly Mam Fund as the marketing and fundraising platform supporting AFESIP (and Mam). Perhaps in a direct or indirect smokescreen effort to remove, or limit obvious affiliation, Mam operates Together1Heart from the backseat. Though the ‘face’ and CEO of this organisation is model and actress AnnaLynne McCord (no other bios are listed on the ‘Team’ page, nor is there any mention of Mam’s name anywhere on the website), Mam is centre stage alongside McCord in all the website and social media photos.<sup>43</sup>



Image 4: AnnaLynne McCord, Somaly Mam, and Sina Vann (Cambodian trafficking survivor); from Together1Heart public Facebook page. Photo credit: Open Magazine.

The Facebook page of Together1Heart, the most active public media platform for the organisation, is dotted with feel-good quotes about ‘love being a human right’ and the need to end ‘this atrocious sin on humanity’, juxtaposed alongside celebrity images and endorsements, and barely-blurred images and stories of recused ‘new girls’ who were raped

<sup>43</sup> Together1Heart, retrieved 25 July 2016, <http://together1heart.org/the-team/>



and beaten by their fathers and brothel clients. In this singular space, the paradoxes, oppressive power imbalances between western saviours and victimised Others, the spectacles and gazing spectators, and casual repetition of trauma, all come together visually to form, in itself, a ‘ritualized pornographic act’, which Hesford argues, works to perpetuate violence rather than remedy, or critically engage with it.<sup>44</sup>

One may ask: How is it possible that Mam, and her work, have been resurrected after all the revelations and deception? Mai’s notion of sexual humanitarianism as a hegemonic epistemology grounded in inequalities produced by neoliberalism could be an explanation as to why, even after the scandal, Mam is capable of mobilising symbolic and material resources. Even though Mam has been discredited, trafficking into the sex industry as a primary problem in Cambodia and the need for humanitarian responses have not withered away and her self-representation and interventions keep ‘making sense’ in sexual humanitarian terms.

## Damage Done

While Mam’s devoted celebrity supporters continue to celebrate the revival of their anti-trafficking hero, sex worker rights activists and other social justice advocates across the globe are reeling with outrage and frustration. Firstly, Mam’s belief that she can singlehandedly ‘fix’ people who have suffered trauma is arrogant and problematic. Genuine survivors need support, resources and justice—not ‘fixing’. Secondly, for many people involved in the sex trade in Cambodia—either by choice, circumstance, or coercion—Mam’s powerful legacy of stories has not led to protection and freedom, but instead increased suffering and violence.

The dominant discourse around sex work in Cambodia—at least the one most audible due to the hegemony of the international ‘rescue industry’<sup>45</sup> there—is that of anti-sex work abolitionism. Within this model, prostitution is conflated with trafficking and is always viewed as an act of violence against women. The anti-trafficking abolitionist movement that Somaly Mam helped spur gained momentum when the anti-trafficking

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<sup>44</sup> Hesford, 2011.

<sup>45</sup> L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007.

agenda became a priority of the Bush Administration in the early 2000s. Along with the ‘Global AIDS Act’, the ‘Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act’ implemented by the US Government in 2003 created a series of conditions for organisations receiving US funding for HIV or anti-trafficking programming. One of these conditions, the ‘anti-prostitution pledge’, required recipients of funding from the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and USAID to explicitly oppose sex work and trafficking, and ‘forbid the promotion of prostitution’.<sup>46</sup> Sex worker advocacy groups that did not have these ‘anti-prostitution’ policies in place or that refused to sign the pledge had important funding pulled. As a result, certain condom programmes ended, and certain drop-in centres for sex workers were closed.<sup>47</sup>

Public health scholar Joanna Busza offers an example of the ways in which those early policy shifts directly impacted a grassroots sex worker advocacy project she was involved with in Cambodia.<sup>48</sup> In 2002, the Lotus Club—which was a sex worker outreach project serving mostly Vietnamese girls and women in the Svay Pak area near Phnom Penh—had caught the attention of anti-trafficking activists and the US State Department. Operated by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), but funded by USAID, Lotus Club was one of approximately eight programmes presented before the Cambodian Government’s House Committee on International Relations on 19 June 2002 as an example of alleged ‘Foreign Government Complicity in Human Trafficking’.<sup>49</sup> According to Busza, the testimonial of the outspoken anti-trafficking activist Donna Hughes<sup>50</sup> grossly misrepresented much of Lotus Club’s work (which involved offering outreach services, primary healthcare, STI treatment,

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<sup>46</sup> M Ditmore and D Allman, ‘An Analysis of the Implementation of PEPFAR’s Anti-Prostitution Pledge and Its Implications for Successful HIV Prevention among Organizations Working with Sex Workers’, *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, vol. 16, issue 1, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> See also L Lyons and M Ford, ‘Where Are Your Victims? How sexual health advocacy came to be counter-trafficking in Indonesia’s Riau Islands’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 12, issue 2, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> J Busza, ‘Having the Rug Pulled From Under Your Feet: One project’s experience of the US policy reversal on sex work’, *Health Policy Plan*, vol. 21, issue 4, 2006.

<sup>49</sup> US Department of State, ‘Daily Appointments Schedule for June 19’, 2002. Accessed 5 March 2006 at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/appt/2002/11251.htm> (found in Busza, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> D Hughes, ‘The 2002 Trafficking in Persons Report: Lost opportunity for progress’, Paper presented at Testimony to the House Committee on International Relations, Washington, DC, 19 June 2002. Unpublished.

contraceptives, condoms, educational workshops, snacks, and a social space for sex workers). Hughes also demonstrated a limited understanding of the issues when she accused project staff of having ‘never called the police’<sup>51</sup> (despite the fact that police were regularly collecting bribes in Svay Pak, and were clients—and allegedly owners—of some of the brothels).<sup>52</sup>

Although the anti-prostitution pledge was not yet formally in place in 2002, the negative attention brought forth by the trafficking complicity allegation against Lotus Club, the resulting self-censorship adopted by MSF after the publicised criticism, the increased pressure to avoid being seen to condone prostitution, and the shift in discourse that conflated sex work with trafficking (despite that the vast majority of women in Svay Pak did not feel they had been deceived or forced into sex work, and instead desired improved working conditions and safety while working),<sup>53</sup> meant that Lotus Club ultimately ‘limped to a close as its funding sources diminished’ and as most brothel-based sex work moved to other tourist destinations throughout Cambodia.<sup>54</sup>

Other grassroots community-led groups in Cambodia, such as Women’s Network for Unity (WNU)—the current sex worker union with approximately 6400 members<sup>55</sup>—were directly affected by the anti-prostitution pledge in the early 2000s. Most local and international NGOs working with WNU at the time were heavily dependent on US funding, and as a result of the new stipulations, they ended their support for fear that collaborations with WNU would jeopardise their funding.<sup>56</sup> Already-marginalised sex workers and their supporters were further pushed to the periphery as the abolitionist anti-trafficking bulldozer raged ahead.

By 2008, the abolitionist movement had gained so much power in Cambodia that, under pressure from the US (Bush Administration)<sup>57</sup> and financial support from UNICEF, the Cambodian government passed the

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<sup>51</sup> Hughes, 2002.

<sup>52</sup> Busza, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> J Busza, ‘Sex Work and Migration: The dangers of oversimplification. A case study of Vietnamese women in Cambodia’, *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 7, 2004.

<sup>54</sup> Busza, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> See Global Network of Sex Work Projects, retrieved 25 July 2016, <http://www.nswp.org/timeline/event/women-s-network-unity-wnu-established-cambodia>

<sup>56</sup> L Sandy, ‘International Agendas and Sex Worker Rights in Cambodia’ in M Ford (ed.), *Social Activism in Southeast Asia*, Routledge, London, 2013, pp. 154–69.

<sup>57</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Off the Streets: Arbitrary detention and other abuses against sex workers in Cambodia*, Human Rights Watch, Phnom Penh, 2010.

'Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation'.<sup>58</sup> This anti-trafficking law formally criminalised soliciting in public, procurement of prostitution, management of prostitution establishments, and provision of premises for prostitution. According to WNU and other human rights groups and academics, its implementation was (and continues to be) devastating to sex workers, as it gave way to a new form of what sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein refers to as 'militarized humanitarianism' and 'carceral feminism',<sup>59</sup> or a crime-control and protection agenda that constructs trafficking as a humanitarian issue that needs addressing through both punitive means, and victim-saving efforts often promoted and even carried out by privileged western feminists and western-funded NGOs. This agenda has contributed to the continued growth of the 'anti-trafficking industrial complex'—which, as activist Carol Leigh explains, 'is based on an historically xenophobic and anti-prostitution framework, that employs a type of double-edged sword—with its efforts to assist and empower victims on one side, and the sharp edge of human rights violations on the other.'<sup>60</sup>

As a result of this type of militarised, sexual humanitarianism within the anti-trafficking industrial complex in Cambodia, undercover raids of tourist-populated hostess bars—raids which began being carried out because of governmental 'morality' campaigns that coincided with the new anti-trafficking law's implementation—resulted in large fines being charged to establishment owners and bar workers who were deemed to be promoting or engaging in 'immoral behaviour' (such as having dancing poles or stages, or wearing short skirts—despite that neither of these activities were technically prohibited).<sup>61</sup> Aided by Mam and AFESIP (among other anti-trafficking groups), large police sweeps of parks and brothels began taking place, where the possession of condoms was used as evidence of prostitution. This is despite that in the late 1990s, Cambodia implemented the 100% Condom Use Programme whereby owners and managers of all entertainment establishments had to enforce condom use as a condition of commercial sex.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Ministry of Justice, 'Explanatory Notes for the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation', Kingdom of Cambodia & UNICEF, Phnom Penh, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> E Bernstein, 'Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The politics of sex, rights, and freedom in contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns', *Signs*, vol. 36, issue 1, 2010, pp. 45–72.

<sup>60</sup> C Leigh, email communication, 15 July 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Hoefinger, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> W Rojanapithayakorn, 'The 100% Condom Use Programme in Asia', *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 14, issue 28, 2006.

According to WNU<sup>63</sup> and Human Rights Watch,<sup>64</sup> many cis- and transgendered adult women arrested during these sweeps were sent to vocational shelters (including AFESIP shelters), or to government-run rehabilitation centres where they faced a number of abuses including forced labour, confiscation of possessions, forced separation from their children, sexual assault, rape and the denial of HIV medication. These actions against sex workers have been justified on the grounds of meeting international obligations to ‘protect’ exploited women and girls; and the law that was meant to ‘save’ victims of trafficking and prostitutes has actually put many more cis- and transgendered women in danger of violence, abuse, stigma, and HIV transmission. A recent study published by Lisa Maher et al,<sup>65</sup> documents how trafficking prohibition efforts are infringing on the right to health of female sex workers in Phnom Penh. Since the anti-trafficking law’s implementation, sex workers have been displaced out of brothels and into the streets and guesthouses, which has disrupted their peer networks, decreased access to condoms and services, adversely impacted their ability to negotiate safer sex, and increased their exposure to violence. In a 2009 Ministry of Health report, the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and STDs (NCHADS) reported a 46% increase in the number of women working on the street, 26% reduction in women seeking STI services, and a 16% decrease in HIV testing following the law’s implementation.<sup>66</sup>

Another harmful consequence of Somaly Mam’s efforts, and the global anti-trafficking movement, has been the establishment of a culture of permanent victimhood for poor women in Cambodia. Impoverished women who sell sex are all portrayed as duped, naive, lacking agency and in need of saving, which is a convenient narrative for those profiting from the rescue industry and the anti-trafficking industrial complex. Mam’s

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<sup>63</sup> Women’s Network for Unity, ‘Annual Narrative Report’, Women’s Network for Unity, Phnom Penh, 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> L. Maher, T C Dixon, P Phlong, J Monney-Somers, E Stein and K Page, ‘Conflicting Rights: How the prohibition of human trafficking and sexual exploitation infringes the right to health of female sex workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia’, *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 17, issue 1, 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Ministry of Health, ‘Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for Continuum of Prevention to Care and Treatment for Women Entertainment Workers in Cambodia’, Ministry of Health, Phnom Penh, 2009.

shelters, and other NGOs built upon the attention she has brought to the issue of trafficking often require women to learn how to sew as part of their educational or vocation skills training programmes (in part of what could be viewed as what sociologist Elena Shih refers to as the ‘anti-trafficking rehabilitation complex’).<sup>67</sup> This type of labour is considered by prostitution abolitionists to be more dignified than sex or entertainment work, despite the equally, or more oppressive working conditions that await women in garment factories when training is complete, where they will earn a maximum of USD140 per month (estimated living wage in Cambodia is USD283<sup>68</sup>). Rather than creating more opportunities for women, this trajectory of rescue-to-training-to-factory work is instead embedding the women firmly within what Anne Elizabeth Moore terms ‘a system of entrenched, gender-based poverty’,<sup>69</sup> Therefore, as Mai explains, by focusing solely on trafficking victimhood, and failing to engage with the ‘feelings and experiences of advantage, disadvantage and exploitation’ voiced by the sex workers themselves,<sup>70</sup> their lives remain largely ignored and entitlements to social justice and rights remain unattended<sup>71</sup> by neoliberal sexual humanitarian interventions.

## Beyond Neoliberal Sexual Humanitarianism

Many loyal supporters argue that Mam’s alleged fabrications and her rehearsed victim scripts do not negate the important global anti-trafficking work she has done. Others have rationalised that her stories have at least ‘helped’ people and raised awareness of the issues. So, does it really matter that she lied?

It matters for many reasons. As a result of her personal declarations of abuse, and the parading of other female ‘victims of trafficking’ in front of cameras so that they may describe abuse in graphic detail, Mam has essentially used poor women and fraudulent stories for her own gain and international prestige. She is guilty of exploitation for profit, and this kind of feminised exploitation for gain is comparable to the actions of

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<sup>67</sup> Shih, 2014.

<sup>68</sup> G Kane, ‘Cambodia Factsheet: Facts on Cambodia’s garment industry,’ Clean Clothes Campaign, Phnom Penh, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> A E Moore, ‘Here’s Why It Matters When a Human Rights Crusader Builds Her Advocacy on Lies’, *Salon*, 28 May 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Mai, 2012, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Mai, 2013.

the ‘pimps’ and other third parties who profit from the labour of sex workers whom she so vehemently opposes in her abolitionist anti-trafficking work. In a tragic twist, the women and children whose bodies she has objectified and stories she has distorted subsequently become ‘slaves’ of modern-day media,<sup>72</sup> and as gender scholar Rutvica Andrijasevic argues, the ‘representation of violence [becomes] violence itself’.<sup>73</sup> Along similar lines, one could argue that the ‘spectacular images’ of suffering presented by Mam deny those women and children ‘rhetorical agency’, or the ability to represent themselves—or construct their own narratives—beyond victimhood.<sup>74</sup> Exaggerating victim scripts works to damage the credibility of real survivors of abuse. These false narratives add fuel to the existing culture of victim-blaming, doubt and denialism that often encompass sexual violence, and make it harder for real survivors to obtain justice. This undermines the furthering of rights and negates the ‘empowerment’ for which Mam and other anti-trafficking and human rights organisations claim to be fighting.

The use of celebrity endorsements, red carpet galas, media accolades, awards, and this brand of market-based sexual humanitarianism that cherry-picks only the most heart-wrenching tales also ends up distracting from, and obfuscating the day-to-day realities of those who suffer from various forms of structural violence and systemic injustice. Poverty, strict gender constraints, sexual and gender discrimination, disparities in education, and lack of viable employment options in Cambodia are not as ‘sexy’ and enticing as the type of traumatic spectacle that moves people to donate. Hijacking the stories of young women to portray only the most horrific narratives creates a hierarchy whereby only *those* stories seem worthy of attention and assistance, and a false dichotomy is created between ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ victims.<sup>75</sup> Prioritising the worst cases in media, and in celebrity-led anti-trafficking campaigns, also obscures the complexity of ‘trafficking’ and downplays deeper underlying issues around migration, employment, and feminised labour.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> P Allyn, ‘Stories are not for sale’, *Huffington Post*, 12 June 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Andrijasevic, 2007, p. 24.

<sup>74</sup> Hesford, 2011, p. 153.

<sup>75</sup> C Hoyle, M Bosworth, and M Dempsey, ‘Labelling the Victims of Sex Trafficking: Exploring the borderlands between rhetoric and reality’, *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 20, issue 3, 2011, p. 313—29.

<sup>76</sup> R Andrijasevic, *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2010.

In the drive to maximise the ‘celebrity effect’<sup>77</sup> and attract publicity, raise awareness and procure funds, what gets lost are the voices of the women, workers, and trafficking survivors, and little space is left to critically analyse the intricate mingling of agency and precarity in the construction of women’s subjectivities.<sup>78</sup> In Cambodia and beyond, people who end up in the sex industry often express desires to be respected for the decisions they make within some very difficult circumstances and constrained environments.<sup>79</sup> They do not all want to be saved by ‘saviours’ who claim to know best. They want social justice, not charity.<sup>80</sup>

The fight for social justice requires more nuanced understandings of global political economy and the complex situations that cause people to migrate and trade sex. It demands an interrogation of broader international issues around racial, economic and class inequalities, neoliberalism, and corporate globalisation,<sup>81</sup> as well as around more localised issues in Cambodia such as domestic violence, inadequate healthcare, gender inequities in education and employment, rapid industrialisation that is leading to forced evictions and land disputes, poor working conditions in garment factories, violent governmental suppression of the labour rights movement, and political corruption—all of which profoundly affect the daily realities and decisions of women and girls.

The troubling case of Somaly Mam shows that stories are powerful vectors of sexual humanitarianism. Rather than exploiting spectacular and exaggerated stories of misery in an effort to abolish ‘sexual slavery’, Mam and her fellow humanitarians should turn their attention to the structural socio-economic preconditions behind the expansion of the contemporary Cambodian sex industry. Only then might the rights of sex workers truly be addressed, as well as the needs and desires of women and children involved in ‘real’ cases of exploitation and sexual labour against their will. It is the everyday stories of sex workers and survivors of abuse themselves that must be amplified if real change is to occur and justice is to be achieved.

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<sup>77</sup> M Wilson, ‘The Celebrity Effect: An exploratory study of the relationship between celebrity and giving using BBC charity appeals data’, Working paper, Centre of Philanthropy, University of Kent, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Andrijasevic, 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Hoefinger, 2013.

<sup>80</sup> Empower Foundation, ‘Hit and Run: The impact of anti-trafficking policy and practice on sex worker’s human rights in Thailand,’ Empower Foundation, RATS-W Team, Chiang Mai, 2012.

<sup>81</sup> E Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, authenticity and the commerce of sex*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2007.



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# Expelling Slavery from the Nation: Representations of labour exploitation in Australia's supply chain

Anna Szörényi

## Abstract

On 4 May 2015, the Australian national broadcaster's current affairs programme *Four Corners* aired an episode titled 'Slaving Away: The dirty secrets behind Australia's fresh food', that provided revelations of labour exploitation of migrant workers on working holiday visas. The government reacted swiftly to these allegations with an 'operation' ostensibly designed to stop the exploitation. In reports of Operation Cloudburst, however, there was a shift in the media's definition of the problem: worker exploitation became visa violations and newspapers shortly reported the resulting action taken: the 'illegal workers' in Australia's food industry had been arrested. This paper tracks the competing discursive and visual representations of this case that ultimately made questions of labour rights become questions of immigration, making it plausible and acceptable that concern over exploitation of workers should be addressed by deportation of 'illegal immigrants'. Such discursive slippage is enabled by cultural amnesia over Australia's history of exploitation of racialised and migrant labourers, which allows 'slavery' to be represented as a 'foreign' problem that can be expelled in defence of the purity of the national domestic space.

**Keywords:** slavery, Australia, labour exploitation, supply chain, nationalism, border control

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## Introduction: Slavery in Australia

This paper explores a recent media exposé of rampant exploitation of workers on temporary ‘working holiday’ visas (also called ‘417 visas’) in Australia. On 4 May 2015, the Australian national broadcaster *Four Corners* ran a programme investigating the conditions faced by ‘417 visa’ holders working in the fresh produce supply chain, picking and packing fruit, vegetables and meats. Employers, aided by labour hire companies, were found to be taking advantage of the workers’ insecure status, particularly of those from Hong Kong and Taiwan. These workers, some of whom had arranged their visas from overseas agencies who advertised them as work opportunities, reported extremely long hours of work in painful conditions, work injuries, sexual harassment and underpaid wages.

The programme actively and explicitly supported the workers, going so far as to name the problem as ‘slavery’, thus invoking the contemporary discourse of ‘modern slavery’ that has sprung from international concern over human trafficking and labour exploitation. It was taken seriously enough that this framing of the problem emerged in government media releases, in which they announced ‘Operation Cloudburst’ to address the problem of exploitation in the agricultural industry. However, a few weeks later when the first results of the taskforce were reported, the issue was framed not as ‘rescuing slaves’, but as ‘deporting illegal workers’, a discursive shift which attracted very little public comment. This paper tracks the discursive moves by which such a solution became a plausible one. Taking the *Four Corners* programme as its primary example, it argues that the programme’s uncritical repetition of nationalist perspectives produced a narrative in which slavery was positioned not as a problem inherent to the nation, but as one imported from outside. The discourse of slavery was thus absorbed into the more dominant discourse around border control, playing into an atmosphere of paranoia in which the nation is constructed not as exploiter of foreign labour, but as innocent victim of unscrupulous foreign criminals. This neat reversal allows Australia’s contradictory and ambivalent attitude to migrant labour, and its history of reliance on slavery, to remain unspoken. In turn, the silence about this history reinforces the construction of the nation’s innocence, so that border control and denial of responsibility for colonial exploitation become mutually reinforcing attitudes.

Migrant workers have always been an ambivalent issue for Australia: both needed and aggressively controlled. One of the first Acts of the newly

federated Australian Parliament in 1901 was the Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901 (Commonwealth), which authorised the mass deportation of the approximately 10,000 Pacific Islands labourers who had been indentured in Queensland's cane fields.<sup>1</sup> This Act was part of the 'White Australia Policy' that was officially pursued by the government for the following 65 years.<sup>2</sup> The policy was accompanied by Australia's enthusiastic participation in the transnational discourse on race and white superiority that circulated between Australia, North America and Europe.<sup>3</sup> In the Australian context it was bolstered by an acute fear of 'invasion' from the populous Asian nations to the north of the continent, regularly featured in media articles and cartoons. White Australians imagined themselves as a small enclave of civilisation in a large 'empty' nation,<sup>4</sup> surrounded by overpopulated territories of potential Asian 'invaders'.<sup>5</sup> While the White Australia policy was officially dismantled during the 1960s and 70s, such imagery remains fresh, now applied to debates about asylum seekers who arrive by boat, who are similarly imagined as uncontrollable, invading 'floods' of foreigners.<sup>6</sup>

But in spite of this anxiety about the presence of black and brown bodies, Australia has always depended on non-white labour, both from Aboriginal workers and from migrants from across Asia and the Pacific. The pastoral stations depended on Aboriginal labour until the 1967 Pastoral Industry Award Wages decision granted equal wages and farmers

<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901*, retrieved 23 July 2016, <http://foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-15.html>

<sup>2</sup> Museum of Australian Democracy, *Timeline 1952-2001*, retrieved 23 July 2016, <http://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/timeline-b-1952-t-2001.html>

<sup>3</sup> M Lake and H Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White men's countries and the question of racial superiority*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Australia's colonial regime had also long depended on a discourse of Australia as 'empty', known as the doctrine of 'Terra Nullius', which, if it acknowledged Indigenous presence at all, argued that they were itinerant and had not therefore 'possessed' the land, but only 'wandered' across it. After a long struggle by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the doctrine was officially overturned by the Mabo legislation of 1990, which recognised Indigenous occupation of the land and sovereignty as a foundation for land rights cases, however this decision was partially wound back by subsequent government legislation.

<sup>5</sup> D Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the rise of Asia 1850-1939*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> A Burke, *Fear of Security: Australia's invasion anxiety*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2008.

chose to pay white labourers instead.<sup>7</sup> Up until 1970, Australian governments removed one-third to one-tenth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and put them into institutional care, with the intent to 'protect' and 'assimilate' them. From here girls were sent to work as domestic servants in white homes, where they often suffered abuse and deprivation.<sup>8</sup> As they were considered unable to manage money, both station workers' and domestic workers' wages were paid into government trust accounts, and most never received anything more than 'pocket money'.<sup>9</sup> The lucrative pearling industry of Western Australia operated first on brutally enslaved Aboriginal labour and then on indentured labourers 'from China, Japan, Malaysia, the Malay Archipelago (now Indonesia) and the Philippines'.<sup>10</sup> From 1863 until the turn of the century approximately 60,000 men, women and children from the South West Pacific were brought to Australia, often forcibly, to serve as indentured labourers in Queensland's cane fields, some staying for generations before they were summarily deported at the inauguration of the White Australia policy.<sup>11</sup> South Australia in the 1890s brought in Tamil indentured workers to work in the tropical regions of the Northern Territory because Europeans were thought unable to physically work in the climate, but also controlled and monitored their movements strictly in the midst of debate about the possibility of them 'settling' or 'colonising' the land and competing with white labour.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, as Banivanua-Mar puts it, Australia was founded on an 'uncomfortable paradox of white settlement in the tropics, where success was seen to be dependent on the absence (to vacate the land), as well as

<sup>7</sup> S Kinnane, J Harrison and I Reinecke, 'Finger Money: The black and white of stolen wages', *Griffith Review*, issue 47, 2015, pp. 49—70; M Allen, 'The Brothers Up North and the Sisters Down South: The Mackay family and the frontier', *Hecate*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2001, pp. 7—31.

<sup>8</sup> A Haebich, 'Stolen Generations', in B Galligan and W Roberts (eds.), *Oxford Companion to Australian Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007; R Wilson, *Bringing Them Home. National Inquiry into the separation of aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997; J Huggins, 'Firing on in the Mind: Aboriginal domestic servants in the inter-war years', *Hecate*, vol. 13, issue 2, 1987/8, pp. 5—23.

<sup>9</sup> A Haebich; S Kinnane, J Harrison and I Reinecke, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> R Balint, 'Aboriginal Women and Asian Men: A maritime history of colour in White Australia', *Signs*, 37, issue 3, 2012, pp. 544—554, p. 548; M Allen, pp. 16—20.

<sup>11</sup> T Banivanua-Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australia-Pacific indentured labor trade*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2007, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> I Krisjansen, 'Australian Orientalism and Liberal Governance: Asian labour in South Australia and the Northern Territory 1890s', *Labour History*, no. 80, 2001, pp. 173—190.

the presence (to work the land), of blackness, which needed in turn to be both protected and restricted and, above all, contained'.<sup>13</sup> Blackness, Banivanua-Mar goes on to point out, was subjected to endlessly changing and policed definitions, while 'the only consistent category seemed to be that of whiteness'.<sup>14</sup> Australia's migrant labour discourse has thus historically been bound up in its overtly racist and colonialist pursuit of what Aileen Moreton-Robinson has called 'The possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty': a circular logic in which white control of land, people and resources is both the founding assumption and the over-arching goal.<sup>15</sup>

This ambivalence and denial has continued to the present day. Australia has prided itself on being a nation that has focused on permanent migration and avoided developing a significant 'guestworker' population. But this is not entirely true. In 2014/15 the combined granting of temporary skilled work visas (33,329 visas) and working holiday visas (54,449 visas) was close to the total number of permanent visas granted (94,543).<sup>16</sup> Such figures have been accompanied by perennial outcries about unfair competition for local workers and undercutting of labour conditions. These panics have an only barely hidden racial subtext; as Mares points out, it is not 'Irish nurses or English doctors' who incite fears of reduced wages and stolen jobs, but workers from developing nations, particularly India and China. Rather than improving pay and conditions for these workers, the union movement consistently calls for the reduction of temporary skilled labour visas, and for migrant workers to be the first to be made redundant.<sup>17</sup>

As a further symptom of denial of any ongoing need for migrant labour, Australia's current migrant labour regulation system is not only increasingly based on temporary visas, but to a large extent on visas which

<sup>13</sup> T Banivanua-Mar, p. 71.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> A Moreton-Robinson, 'The Possessive Logic of Patriarchal White Sovereignty: The High Court and the Yorta Yorta decision', *Borderlands*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2004, retrieved 15 July 2016, [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2\\_2004/moreton\\_possessive.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/moreton_possessive.htm)

<sup>16</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *3412.0 Migration, Australia, 2014-15*, retrieved 23 July 2016, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/3412.0Main%20Features52014-15?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=3412.0&issue=2014-15&num=&view=>

<sup>17</sup> P Mares, 'The Permanent Shift to Temporary Migration', in S Perera, G Seal and S Summers (eds.), *Enter at Own Risk: Australia's population questions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Black Swan Press, Perth, 2010, pp. 65—89, p. 71.

are not primarily defined as work visas. The largest group of temporary workers in the country are international students working casually and part-time in low-paid service jobs while they complete their studies. The second largest group is the official '457' visa for temporary skilled workers, but the third largest is then 'working holiday makers' on tourist visas.<sup>18</sup> Hence much of Australia's migrant labour, particularly the low-skilled sectors, is not named as such in immigration regulations. It is effectively 'hidden', as though there is still a reluctance to admit openly that Australia imports, and depends upon, temporary labour.

This paper focuses particularly on the representation of workers employed under the 'Working Holiday Visa (417)'. This visa is offered to citizens of Belgium, Canada, the Republic of Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, the Republic of Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Taiwan and the United Kingdom.<sup>19</sup> These are one-year visas designed to allow travellers under 31 years of age and without dependents a year of holidaying supplemented with short-term work of no more than six months with any one employer. The visa requirements are clear that the primary purpose of the trip should be 'a holiday in Australia', and applicants must show that they have enough funds to support themselves and to buy a ticket to leave the country. At the same time, these tourists are encouraged to remedy Australia's rural labour shortages by offering them the opportunity for a second year-long stay if during their first year they work for three months in agricultural, mining or construction work in a 'regional area'. In other words, the government implicitly and deliberately positions these visas in order to meet ongoing labour needs for Australia, while at the same time presenting this labour as merely incidental and secondary to the ostensible purpose of providing tourist holidays to young people. This construction seems designed to obscure their presence and legitimacy as foreign workers, placing them in a grey area where they are defined not primarily as workers in need of a living wage, but as tourists earning pocket money to fund their holidays. Even so, they are crucial to the agricultural industry, which suffers from labour shortages. They are thus caught in Australia's ambivalence. As workers they are in demand, yet marginalised and invisible. As migrants,

<sup>18</sup> P Mares, p. 66; see also Australian Bureau of Statistics.

<sup>19</sup> Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection, *Working Holiday visa (subclass 417)*, retrieved 23 July 2016, <https://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Visa-1/417->

particularly if they are non-white, they are subject to the hypervisibility of border surveillance practices: their identities carefully validated, their length of stay and working rights policed through visa requirements and immigration raids, and their presence in the nation the subject of public debate.

It might be expected that such a situation would result in both abuse of workers' need for documented employment, and a market for the 'irregular' labour of visa-overstayers, and that is indeed the case.

## Exploitation in the Supply Chain

The *Four Corners* programme reported on the conditions experienced by tourists in Australia working in the agriculture industry under the 417 visa programme. It reported that young tourists working on farms and in associated fresh food companies, producing food for Australia's three main supermarket chains and 'at least two major fast food outlets', were being exploited, harassed, injured and underpaid. The programme showed that workers were being made to work up to eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, without adequate toilet breaks, packing and cutting cold chickens, crying from the pain in their frozen hands while their supervisor yelled at them to work faster. They stayed in company houses with twenty people sharing a bathroom, or in horse barns. Some workers were being paid half of the legal minimum wage, and paid late and irregularly. A manager offered one young woman accommodation in return for sex. Another young woman working for a company called Covino Farms severed a nerve in her right index finger at work, and when she returned from hospital a manager sexually assaulted her, causing her to rupture her stitches while trying to fend him off. This company has also previously been investigated for imposing twenty-two-hour working shifts. Other allegations included exchanging sexual favours or bribes for visa extensions and providing workers with fake identity papers to use when their legal visas ran out, so that they could keep working beyond the officially allowed six months. Informants and advocates interviewed on the programme identified third-party labour hire companies as managing much (but not all) of this labour. These arrangements allowed businesses to outsource labour provision without responsibility for pay and conditions. Nonetheless, the business managers and the labour hire company managers often clearly had an intimate relationship, and were shown socialising or working together.



While there are many Europeans in Australia on 417 visas, the workers shown on the programme were mostly from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The companies had clearly deliberately sought out those who spoke little English and therefore had limited access to information about their rights and few contacts outside the company. There are evident racialised hierarchies at work here, with employers perceiving Asian workers as being passive, exploitable and sexually available. One employer was caught by hidden camera facing a group of workers who were demanding payment of late wages. When two young, white English women in the group spoke up, his response was to turn to the manager of the labour hire company and say ‘Don’t bring any more Europeans here, OK?’ In line with historical tradition, non-white workers are clearly the expected workers for this particular kind of exploitation.

### ‘Slaving Away’: The positioning of slavery as outside the nation

The *Four Corners* episode titled ‘Slaving Away’ entered a television environment in which issues of border control are highly prominent. Throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Australia, being ‘tough’ on border control has been seen by politicians in both major parties as a crucial vote winner, and the media have often enthusiastically reproduced the discourse. Border control has become a ratings winner, as demonstrated by programmes such as *Border Security: Australia’s Front Line*. This programme, hosted by the commercial network Seven and made with the assistance and sanction of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, is described variously as ‘border-based reality television’,<sup>20</sup> ‘docusoap’<sup>21</sup> and ‘securitainment’.<sup>22</sup> It shows footage of customs officers at work in Australia’s airports and postal service, keeping out the ‘risks’ embodied by the potential entry of foreign food pests, animal products, diseases, and irregular migrants. Since its debut in 2004 it has consistently been one of the nation’s highest rating television programmes.<sup>23</sup> The main

<sup>20</sup> J P Walsh, ‘Border Theatre and Security Spectacles: Surveillance, mobility and reality-based television’, *Crime Media Culture*, vol. 11, issue 2, 2015, pp. 201–21.

<sup>21</sup> P Hughes, ‘Governmentality, Blurred Boundaries and Pleasure in the Docusoap Border Security’, *Continuum*, vol. 24, issue 3, 2010, pp. 39–449.

<sup>22</sup> M Andrejevic, ‘“Securitainment” in the Post 9-11 Era’, *Continuum*, vol. 25, issue 2, 2011, pp. 165–175, p. 167.

<sup>23</sup> J P Walsh, p. 201; E Price and A Nethery, ‘Truth-telling at the Border: An audience appraisal of Border Security’, *Media International Australia: Incorporating culture and policy*, no. 142, pp. 148–156, p. 148.

issues covered in the programme tend to be the possible entry of crop pests, ‘illegal workers’, criminals, and drugs.<sup>24</sup> The programme concentrates disproportionately on non-white offenders and represents those from poorer countries, or shabbily dressed, as intrinsically suspicious.<sup>25</sup> In its viewpoint, explicitly parallel with border control officials, and dressed up by dramatic music and cliff-hanger plot structures, the programme contributes to what DeGenova calls ‘Border Spectacle’.

The Border Spectacle, as we have seen, conjures up the fetish of transgression at the ever-multiplying points of interception in an amorphous border zone where migrant trajectories may be interrupted. These humble migrant practices are produced as flagrant violations of the law, as the brazen acts of veritable outlaws, and thus as occasions for apprehension—literally and figuratively—which is to say, occasions for arrest and deportation, but also for fear and loathing. The Border Spectacle works its magic trick of displacing ‘illegality’ from its point of production (in the law) to the proverbial ‘scene of the crime’, which is of course also the scene of ostensible crime-fighting.<sup>26</sup>

It would be fair to say, therefore, that the *Four Corners* investigation entered a media space that was already thoroughly primed to be suspicious of migrant workers. It is important, however, to understand the different branding of *Four Corners*, a long-running current affairs programme hosted by the national broadcaster, the ABC. In contrast to the close relationship between Seven’s *Border Security* and the government Department of Immigration, the ABC is often criticised by the current Coalition Government for being too ‘Left-wing’ and biased against Coalition policies and politicians, and has faced multiple funding cuts. *Four Corners* presents itself not as ‘entertainment’, but as serious investigative journalism, designed to keep an educated audience informed. It thus targets a rather different audience from *Border Security*, and has a different presentational style. In this respect it is not altogether surprising that the programme is ostensibly more sympathetic to migrant workers than its commercial competitors.

<sup>24</sup> M Andrejevic, pp. 169–170.

<sup>25</sup> M Andrejevic, p. 174; J P Walsh, p. 212.

<sup>26</sup> N De Genova, ‘Spectacles of Migrant “Illegality”: The scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 36, issue 7, 2013, pp. 1180–98.

The *Four Corners* programme is in many ways good investigative journalism. It presents a compelling case backed by interviews with participants, hidden cameras, and a wide range of commentators. These commentators present analyses that go beyond simplistic accusations against ‘evil’ traffickers. In particular, the involvement of supermarket chains in driving prices down, thus forcing employers to keep wages down, is explained at length. Unlike *Border Security*, where irregular migrants are dehumanised, denigrated, and rarely allowed to speak to camera,<sup>27</sup> *Four Corners* presents the voices of abused employees sympathetically and at length. They were able to talk directly to camera with an interpreter and subtitles, and hence not reduced to trying to speak in their limited English. As noted above, some were upset and tearful, but others spoke with determination and with a visible sense that they would be taken seriously. They took the opportunity to present themselves as moral characters, to explain how clearly they had tried to reject sexual advances, and to describe their employers as ‘bad men’. They offered a precise analysis of what had made them vulnerable to exploitation: lack of language skills, no knowledge of Australian employment standards, and racism. It should be noted, too, that some, although clearly suffering from sleeplessness and overwork, were determined to accept the reality of their situation and keep working. ‘If we don’t have a job we can’t earn any money’, said a young Taiwanese man the programme named as Moe. These are more complex representations than are generally afforded to stereotypical ‘victims’ in trafficking and slavery discourses, who are frequently represented as ignorant, passive victims in need of rescue.<sup>28</sup>

However despite this complexity, the programme was framed in particular ways that made certain repeated themes dominate its message. These were encapsulated in the programme’s opening statements. The opening teaser includes two excerpts from interviews: one of MP Keith Pitt saying ‘There is slave labour in this country and we need to get rid of it’, and another of the reporter asking a white British tourist, ‘Did you expect to experience this in Australia?’ and the tourist responding, ‘No, absolutely not. We were shocked. It made me question Australia as a country’. Presenter Kerry O’Brien then speaks to the camera, saying,

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<sup>27</sup> J P Walsh, p. 211.

<sup>28</sup> R Andrijasevic, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, issue 1, 2007, pp. 41–42.

First-world country, Third-world bondage. Welcome to *Four Corners*. The idea that slave labour might exist in Australia is abhorrent. But get used to it. When it comes to food, we're often exhorted to buy Australian. And we probably assume, when we see a sign on the supermarket shelf, 'produced or grown in Australia' that it's safe, hopefully fresh, and we're supporting local jobs.

The words 'Australia' or 'Australian' are repeated five times in these introductory statements, bolstered by further references to 'this country', 'First-world country', and 'local'. The programme thus clearly defines the problem not only as exploitation of workers, but as exploitation of workers *in Australia*. While O'Brien's statement 'Get used to it' could be read as suggesting that in fact slavery *is* structurally present and continuous with Australian society, it is clear that viewers are not expected to dwell on this suggestion. Rather, the overall tone of the commentary is to emphasise the *unexpected, anomalous* revelation of such practices in a 'First-world country'. O'Brien's phrasing makes it clear that the concept of 'bondage' belongs in the 'Third World', rather than in a 'First-world' country. No further explanation of this statement is considered necessary—the audience is assumed to take for granted that Australia is not a place where bondage might occur, but that the 'Third World'—that stereotypical, amorphous, poverty-stricken realm of suffering—naturally is.<sup>29</sup> In fact it is not entirely clear where the outrage is meant to lie—perhaps if bondage can be labelled without explanation as 'Third-world bondage', then the occurrence of bondage in itself is neither surprising nor shocking; rather what seems to be shocking is that the bondage would occur 'here'. This is what the reporter asks the British worker, and she concurs, this is not what she expected *in Australia*. The overall message, then, is that slavery is self-evidently 'abhorrent', and that this needs no

<sup>29</sup> O'Brien does not appear here to be referring to any particular location such as the nations the workers come from, which are actually 'First World'. Ghassan Hage has argued in his ethnographic study of Australian White nationalism that 'when the White people who embrace the White Nation fantasy look at a migrant, what they differentiate between are not those who are NESB [non-English-speaking-background] and those who are not, or those who are European and those who are not, but those who are Third World-looking and those who are not.' In turn he defines 'Whiteness' as 'a fantasy position of cultural dominance born out of the history of European expansion'. G Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White supremacy in a multicultural society*, Routledge, 2012, pp. 18-20. Hence in an Australian context, the term 'Third-world bondage' might be read as referring to a fantasised region of the world inhabited by brown people who are by definition subject to exploitation. It is not an actual social category, but an imagined one.

explanation or definition. What needs explanation is its presence in Australia, and it is its presence in Australia that needs to be 'got rid of', as though slavery can be expelled from the nation, leaving it to proceed with business as usual. Slavery appears as a contaminating agent in an otherwise just and fair nation.

This implicit representation structure is strengthened by the programme's focus on consumption as the end result of the problem. The audience who will be horrified at the presence of slavery will, the narration suggests, be yet more horrified because the food chain puts them into close contact with the products of the exploitation. The audience is identified with the consumer through shots of supermarket shelves and an ominously-toned voiceover: 'The brands we trust. The food we buy and eat on a daily basis', thus constructing an audience 'we' identified by their shopping at the three major chains Coles, Woolworths and Aldi. A union advocate is asked what an accurate food label would be, and suggests 'picked and packed by exploited labour'. Addressed as a consumer rather than a worker or an activist, the audience member's agency is thus tied to the food, and her decision to consume or reject it, while potential interaction with the workers who produce it is not considered. The consumer is not asked to boycott the supermarket and fast food chains, or to campaign for the dismantling of the control these corporations exercise on the nation's food supply and labour standards, or to join a union that supports workers; she is asked to read labels when she is shopping. The focus on food also locates the impact of slavery not only in the nation, but in a nation defined as *domestic* space. While this rhetorical strategy is no doubt effective in making audiences think about their proximity to the problem, and even perhaps in encouraging them to consider their implication in the overall structure of Australia's food chain, it also reinforces the sense of there being a contaminating agent within what would otherwise be a comfortable, nurturing, homey space. Nation and home appear to become co-extensive.

The fact that *food* is the vehicle by which slavery enters proximity with the comfortable Australian consumer renders this sense of contamination all the more vivid. In recent scholarship, there has been a turn to exploring the ways in which media creates 'affective communities',<sup>30</sup> becoming sites

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<sup>30</sup> S Yell, 'Natural Disaster News and Communities of Feeling: The affective interpellation of local and global publics', *Social Semiotics*, vol. 22, issue 4, 2012, pp. 409–428.

where audience members can create shared group identifications through their shared emotional reactions to what is shown on screen. Given that emotions are deeply embedded in our sense of self, the ways in which media representations can combine sensory and emotional reactions with particular perspectives on the world are potentially powerful and far-reaching. In this case, the *Four Corners* programme is quite explicit about the emotional responses it expects from its viewers: it addresses them directly as consumers worried about what they are taking into their bodies. While stopping short of suggesting that exploited workers are physically contaminating the food supply, the programme nonetheless raises the spectre of unsafe food through the use of phrases such as ‘we probably assume... the food is safe, hopefully fresh’, and (in ominous tones) ‘the brands we trust, the food we buy and eat’. As the programme’s subtitle suggests, slavery is a ‘dirty secret’. The story thus has the structure of ‘disgust’: the problem of slavery becomes something taken in that needs to be expelled. As Sara Ahmed argues, disgust is an emotion that makes us aware of boundaries between inside and outside.<sup>31</sup> To the mapping of the nation onto ‘home’ we can thus also add a bodily dimension.

Where do exploited workers fit in this alignment of bodies around domestic safety and external contamination? ‘Slaving Away’ is unsettled on this question. While on the one hand it places workers’ experiences centre stage, on the other hand its nationalist framing and its address to an audience defined as comfortable consumers leaves workers with no clear plot role beyond being witnesses to a crime that does not belong in the nation. Only the British tourist shown at the beginning of the programme is invited to align her gaze with that of the audience, shocked at the entry of ‘Third World’ practices into their ‘First World’ lives. The position of the other workers is not given a plot resolution in the programme. It was, however, given a plot resolution in the media reports that followed, in which the narrative seamlessly merged concern over slavery into the scandal of border violations, a story in which workers were placed firmly into the category of foreigners under suspicion.

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<sup>31</sup> S Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2004, p. 83.

## Operation Cloudburst

In the *Four Corners* report 'Slaving Away', the problematic tendencies I have noted towards presenting the issue of worker exploitation in nationalist terms as an issue of foreign slavery were mitigated by other possible explanations of the problem. In subsequent news reports, however, these tendencies become all too literal. As noted above, on 28 May, weeks after the *Four Corners* programme, the government announced Operation Cloudburst, a joint operation between the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, the Fair Work Ombudsman, and state and federal police, to 'tackle illegal workers, visa fraud and worker exploitation across Australia'.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of the Department's mention of worker exploitation, most outlets reported the resultant arrests simply as the detention of 'illegal workers'. The *Guardian's* entry in its parliamentary briefing reported that three of the businesses raided were featured in the *Four Corners* programme.<sup>33</sup> But most media outlets simply reported the joint press release from the Minister and Assistant Minister of Immigration and Border Control, without reference to that story. The headline on the press release was 'Illegal Workers Targeted Nationally'. The ABC's rural news outlet ran with 'Operation Cloudburst detains 22 suspected illegal workers at Gatton, Queensland'.<sup>34</sup> The Murdoch-owned national newspaper *The Australian* said 'Firms flouted work visa laws'<sup>35</sup> while the tabloid *Herald Sun* said 'Alleged illegal farm workers to be deported after police raids'.<sup>36</sup> The problem of worker exploitation all but disappears here, replaced by the problem of 'illegal workers'. Indeed it seems likely that 'Kevin', the worker who testified on 'Slaving Away' to having been given fake identification so that he could keep working after his time limit expired, would have been one of the arrested workers.

<sup>32</sup> The Hon P Dutton and the Hon M Cash, 'Joint Media Release: Illegal workers targeted nationally', 28 May 2015, retrieved 24 July 2016, <http://www.minister.border.gov.au/peterdutton/2015/Pages/illegal-workers-targeted-nationally.aspx>

<sup>33</sup> G Chan, 'Australian politics live with Gabrielle Chan: Illegal workers found', *The Guardian*, 28 May 2015, retrieved 11 January 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/live/2015/may/28/sydney-siege-gunmans-letter-to-brandis-anything-but-routine-politics-live#block-55668c94e4b05d536e4bc243>

<sup>34</sup> K Buchanan and M McCarthy, "'Operation Cloudburst" detains 22 suspected illegal workers at Gatton, Queensland', *ABC Rural*, 29 May 2015.

<sup>35</sup> J Owens, 'Investigators swoop on businesses in illegal work visa crackdown', *The Australian*, 28 May 2015.

<sup>36</sup> D Hurley, 'Alleged illegal farm workers to be deported after police raids in Shepparton', *The Herald Sun*, 1 June 2015.

Beyond the headlines, the issue of worker exploitation did not entirely disappear, but drifted in and out of focus. The ministerial press release, from which most of the newspapers simply copied extracts, quotes the minister sliding from talking about illegal workers to employers and back to illegal workers.

Mr Dutton said the vast majority of workers did the right thing, but a small number were breaking the law.

‘The Australian Government has made it very clear to that small minority that we will not put up with unscrupulous employers and labour hire companies blatantly flouting the law and allowing overseas workers to work illegally in Australia,’ he said.<sup>37</sup>

Ultimately, then, the minister identified workers as the problem and as criminal agents, their crime as ‘working illegally’, and employers as accessories who ‘allow’ the problem to happen. Working conditions and payment below the legal minimum wage disappear in this picture, and Mr Dutton certainly does not mention slavery.

The press release also contained the detail that two of those detained for visa violations were being investigated as operators of labour hire companies. Taken on their own, these reports thus gave the picture that the problem is created by foreigners. Both those who run the labour hire companies that enforce workers’ poor conditions, and those who do the work, are here covered by the one category—‘illegal workers’—and the event becomes a case of crime solved, rather than one of structural problems in the organisation of supply chains. In keeping with this interpretation, the Department released a hand-held video showing the police carrying out the overnight raids, as if it were a police drama.<sup>38</sup> Interviewed for the ABC news report, the Assistant Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, Senator Cash, did mention exploitation, but did not clearly link it to working conditions. As quoted by the ABC, the statement seems to suggest that in fact working without a visa *is* the exploitation. ‘We will be as tough on those who seek to abuse our immigration system as we have been on those who seek to come here illegally,’ she said. ‘We will not stand for worker exploitation.’<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> The Hon P Dutton and the Hon M Cash.

<sup>38</sup> Department of Immigration and Border Protection, ‘Operation Cloudburst’, Newsroom, retrieved 24 July 2016, <http://newsroom.border.gov.au/channels/Community-awareness/videos>

<sup>39</sup> K Buchanan and M McCarthy.



To anyone who has lived in Australia in recent decades, Cash's phrasing here is familiar and clear: she is positioning irregular labour as equivalent to onshore asylum seeking. Since Prime Minister John Howard came into power in 1996, being 'tough on borders' has been the mantra of both major political parties, and refers to the intent to stop asylum seekers from gaining access to Australian territory in order to claim asylum, an act that in Australian government rhetoric, and contrary to international law, is positioned as 'illegal'. Onshore asylum seekers are thus variously called 'queue jumpers', 'boat people' or simply 'illegals'. What may not be apparent to those who have not lived in Australia is the extent to which this language in turn serves as an implicit shorthand for racism in general. Deliberately sensationalised fears over border crossing by asylum seekers have become the primary means by which Australia is constructed as a vulnerable nation whose borders must be protected.<sup>40</sup> Aside from a certain incoherence then, what Cash's unstable positioning of blame and victimhood does is to divert compassion away from the workers in the same way that it has been diverted away from asylum seekers: the need to save them from exploitation is overridden by the need to save the nation from people without visas who carry slavery within Australia.

## Conclusion

De Genova points out that 'illegal' migration is not a pre-existing act propagated by migrants, but a direct effect of the categories created by the processes of border management and surveillance that are ostensibly designed to control it.<sup>41</sup> In the case of Australia's 417 visa, a dependence of the labour market on migrant workers combined with a denial of that dependence produces a regulatory environment in which workers are structurally liable to exploitation, caught between industry demand for their labour and government surveillance of their migration status. This ambivalence and denial is continuous with cultural amnesia over Australia's long history of exploitation of migrant and Indigenous labour, which has always been both necessary to the nation and viewed as a problematic element in a nation aspiring to be 'white'. It might be expected that ambivalence would produce competing representations, and that is what has happened in the case studied here. While the 'Slaving Away' programme positioned exploited 417 visa holders as victims of abusive labour

<sup>40</sup> A Burke, *In Fear of Security: Australia's invasion anxiety*, Pluto Press, Annandale NSW, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> N De Genova, p. 1190.

practices, reports on 'Operation Cloudburst' positioned them as 'illegal workers'. The juxtaposition of these reports produced a picture in which the deporting of migrant workers appeared as the solution to the exploitation of those same migrant workers.

My argument here is that this apparently contradictory juxtaposition attracted little public comment because while it may not make ethical sense, it makes *affective* sense. Its affective sense comes from the fact that in spite of their differences over what the real problem of migrant labour might be, *both the 'slavery' discourse (as it was presented here), and the 'border control' discourse share the same vision of the nation*. Even as it sought to evoke sympathy for the workers, the 'Slaving Away' programme participated in a vision of the nation as a comfortable domestic space vulnerable to contamination by the 'foreign' problem of slavery. The programme thus produced competing images of vulnerability, in which the vulnerability of the workers vied with the vulnerability of the national consumer. The audience, however, were addressed precisely *as* this national consumer, primarily concerned not with helping others, but with preserving the purity of the national domestic space of consumption.

Meanwhile, defined as victims of a 'slavery' presented as foreign evil, rather than victims of Australia's contradictory attitude to migrant labour, the exploited migrant workers in the food chain seem to belong to a different world, one outside the boundaries of the developed nation, where 'bondage' is apparently to be expected. There are convenient reversals happening here, in which white Australia, living off the wealth and territory gained through colonial exploitation, can now present slavery—and slaves along with it—as a problem that happens elsewhere. The story that would render such alignments impossible is the one story that was not told: the story of how slavery is not an external problem, but one integral to the Australian nation. Recognising this means also recognising the ways in which Australia's 'borderpanic', proliferating across multiple and intersecting sites of xenophobia,<sup>42</sup> is a means of avoiding responsibility for its own history, and thus inevitably a site of the violent repetition of that history.

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<sup>42</sup> S Perera, 'The Gender of Borderpanic: Women in circuits of security, state, globalisation and new (and old) empire' in M Caine and A Howe (eds.), *Women, Crime and Social Harm: Towards a criminology for the global age*, Hart, Oxford, UK, 2008, pp. 69—93, p. 69.

Without this insight, ‘foreign’ bodies, the bodies of exploited workers, easily become aligned with the problem of slavery itself, and the solution appears not as structural adjustment to migration and labour regulations, but as expulsion of the contaminating presence. The nation’s claim to being an ‘innocent’ and privileged space where exploitation does not happen can thus only be maintained through the obsessive construction of borders between inside and outside. From here the difference between giving a worker decent working conditions, and deporting a worker, do not come to matter, because the differences which have been made to matter instead are those between the insiders and outsiders to the nation. The term ‘illegal’ does the work of aligning the nation together in fear of outsiders, and positions outsiders as those who break the law. The consumer who wants to safely purchase her food without thinking about slavery then becomes located in this government discourse as the law-abiding insider, who is under threat from these outsiders who have brought foreign methods of exploitation into the nation. From here the solution can only be to expel the contaminating agent.

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# ‘It’s All in Their Brain’: Constructing the figure of the trafficking victim on the US-Mexico border

*Gabriella Sanchez*

## Abstract

This article is a qualitative reflection on a series of human trafficking awareness meetings held in a city on the US-Mexico border. It argues that along this border, representations of the human trafficking victim go beyond the stereotypical notions of the virginal female youth, target of sexual exploitation and violence. Rather, characterisations reflect a specific set of cultural and historical forms which further frame victims as inherently foreign, a proxy for Mexican, despite the ethnic similarities connecting communities on both sides of the US-Mexico divide. References to Mexican origin in this part of the United States have historically been used as part of an attempt to articulate social and ethnic difference, often despite sharing a common ethnic past. In the context of American anti-immigrant sentiments, Mexicans are described not only as inherently foreign, or as lacking government-sanctioned immigration status, but also as innately uncivilised, uneducated, hypersexual, criminal and pathological. On the US-Mexico border these characterisations become further complicated by the immediacy of Mexican border cities and their ongoing struggles amid the war on drugs.

Collectively, the tropes of crime, violence and inherent pathos historically associated with Mexico and its people have seeped into the construction of the human trafficking rhetoric on the border, and have been quickly and effectively disseminated, despite the absence of empirically-informed indicators. Furthermore, while this practice is reflective of the efforts through which historically Mexican nationals have been othered along the US-Mexico border, in the current context of globalised fears over migrants and national security, human trafficking constructions become another tool of US border control and migration governance.

**Keywords:** anti-trafficking, human trafficking, migration, US-Mexico border, victim advocates

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## Introduction

I am late for a meeting convened by a group of local NGOs involved in the fight against human trafficking in the city of Stanton,<sup>1</sup> a community on the US side of the border with Mexico. As a newly arrived researcher to this community I am here to listen to law enforcement agents and local NGO representatives talk about local human trafficking and its alleged explosive growth.

From the moment I walk into the building I become aware of my feelings of unease. I fear the day will be filled with commonplace narratives of captive foreign women forced into prostitution—the familiar modern-day slavery rhetoric of prostitution abolitionist anti-trafficking interventions. Yet I am also attending driven by what I have sensed amounts to a much more complex, much more intriguing local discourse. From the moment I arrived in this predominantly Mexican-American US city I became aware of the existence of a not so subtle series of tropes pertaining to the people of Rio Viejo, Stanton’s neighbouring city on the Mexican side. These tropes—which involve notions of cultural and racial difference—seem to have seeped into local human trafficking discourses. While the virginal, naïve and young woman who has fallen prey to unscrupulous traffickers is still centrepiece in the local human trafficking discourse, this figure reveals a series of precise, racialised codes that are culturally and historically specific.

The present article reflects my efforts to make sense of these tropes. It provides a qualitative reflection of a series of public meetings held in Stanton which aimed to generate awareness of human trafficking among the local public. It argues that in this city the figure of the human trafficking victim is not merely articulated as the young female target of sexual exploitation and violence but is also construed as migrant and racialised as Mexican.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the locations where research was conducted have been changed to maintain the anonymity of respondents.

References to Mexican origin have historically been used to articulate explicitly racialised and racist notions of Mexican nationals. These notions have involved representations of Mexicans as inherently foreign, or as lacking government-sanctioned immigration status, but also as innately uncivilised, uneducated, hyper-sexual, criminal and even pathological. In Stanton, these characterisations, often articulated by Mexican Americans, become further complicated by the city's immediacy to Rio Viejo and that city's violent, troubled past. The astonishing homicide rate arising, according to official discourses, from conflicts among Mexican drug trafficking organisations consolidated Rio Viejo's reputation as one of the most dangerous cities in the world. Stanton responded with a frantic campaign to establish its status as one of the safest US cities, in an attempt to position its identity as counter to that of the troubled city to its south.

I will argue that collectively, long-standing, racialised tropes of Mexicans as criminal, violent and inherently pathological stand as fundamental elements in the construction of the human trafficking rhetoric and its expeditious and effective dissemination and acceptance in border communities, despite the absence of empirical evidence. Furthermore, I will argue that while these practices reflect the historical othering of Mexican nationals along the border, in the current context of globalised fears over migrants and national security, human trafficking constructions—with the figure of the trafficking victim as a female Mexican migrant at the centre—constitute another tool of US border control and migration governance.<sup>2</sup>

The sections that follow, in addition to outlining research methods and activities, provide an overview of the literature of trafficking victims' representations, followed by background sections on Stanton and Rio Viejo and the way in which Mexico's war on drugs has furthered ingrained perceptions of Mexico's border cities as places of inherent decay, crime and vice. I will argue that human trafficking awareness activities in Stanton coincide with the exodus of a significant number of Mexican residents who, fleeing the violence in Mexico, have relocated to cities on the US side of the border. In particular, the emphasis of local anti-trafficking efforts in Stanton to construct the victim as a migrant—specifically as a *Mexican*

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<sup>2</sup> N Mai, 'Between Embodied Cosmopolitanism and Sexual Humanitarianism: The fractal mobilities and subjectivities working in the sex industry', in V Baby-Collins and L Anteby (eds.), *Borders, Mobilities and Migrations: Perspectives from the Mediterranean in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Peter Lang, Brussels, 2013.

migrant—are indicative of the local anxieties over the presence of displaced Mexicans.

## Methods and Activities

The focus of this article is a series of five human trafficking awareness meetings held in Stanton, between April 2014 and February 2016. These meetings were facilitated by members of a local anti-trafficking coalition (referred to in this paper as advocates) consisting of local NGOs working in collaboration with government agencies. The meetings were open to the public and announced via local and social media. The meetings had the goal of ‘educating people about how relevant [human trafficking] is to the [Stanton] region’ and of teaching local residents how to ‘recognize the faces of people who might be affected’<sup>3</sup> in order to assist law enforcement in the identification and reporting of human trafficking activity.

I became aware of these meetings during conversations with local community advocates and researchers. Some of the observations outlined in this essay took place in the context of my own participation at one of these meetings in October 2015. Yet the majority of the information comes from publicly-available data on at least four other meetings which were covered by local media.

Human trafficking awareness meetings were facilitated primarily by women. The facilitators identified themselves as native Stantonites or as having lived in the community for a significant number of years. While no specific details on their age or any other demographic identifiers were found in media records, advocates were adults and identified themselves as culturally aware of the challenges experienced by the trafficking victims by virtue of sharing the same ethnic background (i.e. Mexican). They reported having long histories of employment with local NGOs and government agencies, working as victim advocates, case managers and criminal investigators. Each had worked extensively in local anti-trafficking organisations that work directly with victims. None of them reported having received any kind of psychiatric training.

The number of attendees at these meetings, according to published reports, exceeded 50 on at least one occasion, and included local NGO staff, law

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<sup>3</sup> L. Lopez, ‘Group launches campaign against sex trafficking’, *Stanton Times*, 28 January 2016.

enforcement officials, and community members.<sup>4</sup> Also in attendance were members of immigration federal agencies.<sup>5</sup> There was a specific range of topics covered in the meetings: general human trafficking awareness; traffickers' *modus operandi*; descriptions of anti-trafficking law enforcement activities; references to specific human trafficking prosecutions carried out locally or within this US border state and descriptions of the work conducted by local anti-trafficking NGOs. A concept fundamental to the trafficking awareness meeting was the figure of the trafficking victim: the young, naïve, migrant woman from Mexico.

## Representing the Trafficking Victim: A review of the literature

As Sanghera reflects, anti-trafficking discourses involve 'complicated categories, constructs and players' where 'issues of migration, trafficking and sex work are peppered with constructs of sexuality, gender and vulnerability', leading to the emergence of deeply ingrained 'assumptions and myths'<sup>6</sup> which have persisted despite the range of critical efforts to challenge their staying power.<sup>7</sup>

The trafficking victim trope—that of a sexually exploited, virginal young female held against her will by greedy, hyper-violent male predators—has often been critiqued by feminist, critical and post-colonial scholars who have voiced concerns about the overly simplistic nature of such figures.<sup>8</sup> Exploring the lives of sex workers, scholars have criticised the reduction of their complex experiences of precarity and resilience.<sup>9</sup> Choo, in her

<sup>4</sup> D Crowder, 'Focusing on the modern version of slavery: Junior League backs human trafficking awareness', *Stanton Inc*, 1 February 2016.

<sup>5</sup> A Martínez, 'Groups Unite to Aid Human Trafficking Victims', *Stanton Times*, 20 January 2016.

<sup>6</sup> J Sanghera, 'Unpacking the Trafficking Discourse', in K Kempadoo, J Sanghera and B Pattanaik (eds.), *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New perspectives on migration, sex work, and human rights*, 2005, pp. 3–4.

<sup>7</sup> R Andrijasevic, 'The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation', in M Evans et al. (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Sage, London, 2014, p. 360.

<sup>8</sup> Andrijasevic, 2014; E Bernstein, 'Sex, Trafficking and the Politics of Freedom', *School of Social Science Occasional Papers No. 45m* 2012, Princeton: Institute of Advanced Studies; Sanghera, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, 2007; P Kelly, *Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's most modern brothel*, University of California Press, 2008; N Mai, 'Surfing Liquid Modernity: Albanian and Romanian male sex workers in Europe', in P Aggleton, and R Parker, (eds.) *Men Who Sell Sex: Global perspectives*, Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 27–41; M Padilla, *Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, sexuality, and AIDS in the Dominican Republic*, University of Chicago Press, 2008.



work on Korean hostesses, and Cheng, in her examination of love in US military camp towns in North Korea,<sup>10</sup> challenge the dichotomous construct of the powerful Western male (in this case, US military personnel) and the timid trafficking victim by showing how power differentials are used in ‘unexpected and creative ways by migrant hostesses as a discursive resource to attract clients while appealing to their sense of benevolence and sympathy to rescue third world women in need’.<sup>11</sup> Choo’s rich ethnographic data sheds further light on the conditions faced by both parties, ‘... participat[ing] under constraining migrant labor contracts to pursue opportunities for social, economic and global mobility’.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the range of empirically grounded, critical efforts challenging the figure of the passive, exploited trafficking victim, the trope continues to dominate public and policy discourses. Its dominance is also clear in the literature of trafficking on the US-Mexico border where, with very few exceptions, trafficking has continued to be described primarily from a prostitution abolitionist perspective. Although a growing number of authors engage in more critical, grounded work that acknowledges the agency of women in sex work, the majority of literature, as Vanwesenbeeck states, ‘is still much more about sex than it is about work’,<sup>13</sup> focusing on topics that further stigmatise sex workers (e.g. incidence of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV and condom use, the wrongs associated with sex-workers’ labour choices, the identification and description of the forms of victimisation that allegedly led them to sex work, etc.).

In her work on the construction and representation of the trafficked victim, Andrijasevic suggests that beyond the mapping of agency and the articulation of rights, understanding how the figure of the victim is embedded in larger historical, cultural and political contexts is imperative in sex work analyses.<sup>14</sup> The case of Stanton provides a unique window

<sup>10</sup> S Cheng, *On the Move for Love: Migrant entertainers and the US military in South Korea*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> H Y Choo, ‘Selling Fantasies of Rescue: Intimate labor, Filipina migrant hostesses, and US GIs in a shifting global order’, *Positions*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2016, pp.179—203.

<sup>12</sup> Choo, 2016, p. 200.

<sup>13</sup> I Vanwesenbeeck, ‘Another Decade of Social Scientific Work on Sex Work: A review of research 1990–2000’, *Annual Review of Sex Research*, vol. 12, issue 1, 2001, pp. 242—89.

<sup>14</sup> Andrijasevic, 2014, p. 360.

into how hierarchies of pathology alongside racialised articulations of Mexican identity have been effective in grounding anti-trafficking discourses on the US-Mexico border despite the lack of empirical data. It outlines how Stantonites have found ways to position themselves as different from the people in Rio Viejo amid the severe, deeply engrained forms of structural inequality and violence both communities have historically faced.

## Stanton

Stanton is a community of a little over 800,000 inhabitants neighbouring the Mexican city of Rio Viejo to the south. Populations combined, this region constitutes one of the largest metropolitan areas on the US-Mexico border. On its own, Stanton has historically stood as one of the most strategically located cities in North America, connecting Mexico to the United States through a series of ports of entry—railroad and transportation hubs which allow for the overland transit of a significant portion of the trade between the two countries. Stanton is also home to one of the largest military bases in the continental US.

Prior to US immigration efforts that in the 1990s were effective at shifting migration flows into the Sonoran desert,<sup>15</sup> Stanton had been an important hub for irregular border crossings. Currently, given its location, the city is a key operational centre for multiple government agencies, but particularly for those involved in the monitoring of trade and migration flows, and border security. However the number of irregular border crossings along this section of the border is among the lowest compared with other regions.

Like most cities on the US-Mexico border, Stanton has historic, deeply ingrained, social and economic, race-based inequalities. Along the border, official US Census data puts the rate of Latino residents at 81 per cent. Almost one-quarter of the entire border population lives in poverty.<sup>16</sup> While the unemployment rate has decreased in light of the overall US

<sup>15</sup> Operations ‘Hold the Line’ and ‘Gatekeeper’, implemented in California and Texas respectively, were effective at temporarily curtailing irregular migration flows into the United States.

<sup>16</sup> US Census Office, QuickFacts: Stanton County, Texas, retrieved 24 July 2016, <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/48141>

economic recovery, most employment options throughout the border are limited to fields of scarce growth and potential and which generally command low wages. Low-income residents face significant limitations to affordable healthcare and education. Environmental disasters—both natural and man-made<sup>17</sup>—increase vulnerability of the poor, who are often monolingual speakers of Spanish, and whose access to state-sponsored programmes and services is limited. Exposure to pollutants is exacerbated in border communities given their arid weather, frequent temperature inversions, heavy border traffic, and the prevalence of aged, poorly maintained vehicles, all negatively impacting the health of local residents.

The generations-long economic disparities existing along the entire border, its proximity to Mexico, the availability of cheaper goods and services and in some cases, the demand for those that were labelled illicit or even illegal in US territory, have been factors in the emergence of the border as a fertile territory for smugglings of multiple kinds. ‘Borderlanders,’ Diaz says, ‘[have historically] smuggled, out of ignorance of the law, to save or make money, or to avoid the inconvenience of finding a customs post.’ The everydayness of clandestine trade eventually leads locals to construct ‘a moral economy of the illicit trade’<sup>18</sup> where illicit activity has been often tolerated, if not altogether normalised.

Despite the long-standing, well documented history of illicit activity in cities on the US side of the border, most of the stigma pertaining to the border as a zone of decay, vice and crime appears inherently connected to the cities on the Mexican side. Mexico’s border cities and towns have historically been a destination for US residents in search of the often exoticised Mexican experience, or for those looking for goods and services which can be obtained at a lower cost. Academic literature has often made reference to Americans’ patronage of Mexican red light districts,<sup>19</sup> and in fact, prior to the onset of the drug-trafficking related violence, the one in Rio Viejo was among the most frequented, attracting

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<sup>17</sup> T W Collins, A M Jimenez, and S E Grineski, ‘Hispanic Health Disparities after a Flood Disaster: Results of a population-based survey of individuals experiencing home site damage in Stanton (Texas, USA)’, *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2013, pp. 415–26.

<sup>18</sup> G T Diaz, *Border Contraband: A history of smuggling across the Rio Grande*, University of Texas Press, 2015, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> S X Zhang, ‘Woman Pullers: Pimping and sex trafficking in a Mexican border city’, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 56, issue 5, 2011, pp. 509–528.

US-based soldiers stationed across the border, as well as US residents seeking the promise of unrestricted alcohol, Mexican food and cheap sex.

## Rio Viejo

Although Rio Viejo began to experience widespread and disturbing violence already in the 1990s, between 2007 and 2011 it faced a period of extraordinary brutality. While numbers vary significantly, estimates place the number of homicides in Mexico during those years in the 100,000 range, the majority of them on the US-Mexico border.<sup>20</sup> The intensity of the violence and the exceptionally large number of killings led to the inclusion of multiple cities on the Mexican side of the border, including Rio Viejo, in the US State Department no-travel list, as well as designation as one of the most dangerous cities globally.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars and policy makers have explained this most recent wave of violence as the result of the battle among Mexican drug trafficking organisations for territory control,<sup>22</sup> even though the history of structural violence on the border pre-dates the war on drugs. The narrative of Rio Viejo as a crime-ridden city has been further compounded by the hyper-visibility of the drug conflict and its presentation in the media, most often through excessively graphic images of violence, which have further inscribed the US-Mexico border in the global imagination as a place of violence and death and its residents as pathologically crime-prone.

In these settings the attempts of Stanton's predominantly Mexican American residents to distinguish themselves from their neighbours to the south should not come as a surprise. Yet the story is not new: Mexican Americans have historically fought to maintain a degree of social separation from Mexicans. In Colonial Mexico, residents of Mexico's North sought to be perceived as having stronger European roots than Mexicans in other parts of the colony.<sup>23</sup> It was common among Mexican Americans born in California, New Mexico and Texas during the 18<sup>th</sup> and

<sup>20</sup> D A Shirk, 'Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and analysis from 2001–2009', *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 13, issue 2–3, 2010, pp. 167–174.

<sup>21</sup> G Correa-Cabrera and K Staudt, 'An Introduction to the Multiple US–Mexico Borders', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 29, issue 4, 2014, pp. 385–90.

<sup>22</sup> H Campbell, *Drug War Zone*, University of Texas Press, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> D G Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican immigrants, and the politics of ethnicity* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.

19<sup>th</sup> centuries to claim having higher levels of Spanish blood than Mexicans, who by virtue of performing the dirtiest, most labour intensive jobs had been stigmatised as *gente corriente*—the most vulgar, poor folk.<sup>24</sup>

The current visibility of Mexico's drug trafficking related violence and the widespread concerns over irregular migration in the US have only facilitated the continued othering of those who reside on the Mexican side of the border, and in the case of Stanton—the people of Rio Viejo. The othering, however, has been selective. When the violence in Rio Viejo forced many to relocate to Stanton, members of the Mexican upper class (perceived as good standing and respectable citizens) settled easily in the US city, given their resources and connections. Yet the large majority of those who fled the violence were low-income, working class Rio Viejo residents, many of whom to this date have, despite having valid claims for asylum, been unable to qualify for relief, the threshold of evidence required for them to file asylum claims being exceedingly steep. This has led them to remain in conditions of heightened precarity, and to join Stanton's myriad of informal economies.

## Creating Human Trafficking on the Border

Once the anti-trafficking meeting starts, it does not take long to learn the goal of the presenters: generate awareness of human trafficking among the general population so that they too learn how to identify victims who can then live a life free of oppression, which is described as intrinsic to sex work. In line with the prostitution abolitionist discourse, the trafficking victim is identified as a young, innocent teen exploited by unscrupulous Mexican pimps and madams who profit from her labour in what is described as Stanton's booming local sex market. In Stanton, we are told, this universe is hidden, inaccessible and brutal, and is comprised of strip clubs, massage parlours, and dance clubs where migrant women are forced to sell their bodies, having been forcefully separated from their loved ones. Victims can be everywhere, and be anybody; they are also easy to recognise as they appear to be 'out of place'—a proxy for foreign:

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<sup>24</sup> Gutierrez, 1995, p. 33.

‘You never know who you are standing next to, or who you are sitting with who might have survived such a horrible experience. (...) Most of the victims nationwide come to the attention of entities like us because someone sees something that isn’t right—the person looks like they are being controlled or beaten up and needs help. A shy person who won’t make eye contact, a neighbour who never leaves the house alone... it could be at a grocery store, a salon, a hotel or at your apartment complex; there are so many places where the victim could be forced to go.’<sup>25</sup>

The concerns over the spread of trafficking in Stanton seem to coincide with the exodus of Mexican nationals to cities on the US side of the border. In fact, while reports on the state of trafficking in the US were ubiquitous following the passage of the TVPA in 2000, there is no indication that human trafficking was much of a concern on the borderlands, let alone in Stanton itself, perhaps due to the very health of the sex market in the cities on the Mexican side of the border. In fact, it appears anti-trafficking activity in Stanton was virtually non-existent prior to 2011. Perhaps the most telling piece of evidence of this absence and very recent nature of local residents’ concerns over the spread of trafficking came from one of the advocates themselves:

‘When we started [the anti-trafficking work] at the Sheriff’s department we were asked to look for agencies and universities that have (sic) already done studies but nobody has even done a study on human trafficking so we really have no statistical data locally.’

The lack of data can be explained by an absence of state regulations requiring the collection of trafficking statistics or by a lack of empirically-based studies on trafficking. Yet the call to identify victims appears to be an acknowledgement on the part of Stanton’s anti-trafficking advocates that they are unable to identify victims. The audience is informed that many victims refuse their help. While this could be explained as the women’s rejection of moralistic discourses, it may also be that they do not identify themselves as trafficked.

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<sup>25</sup> C. Gaytan, ‘Sex trafficking and human trafficking a problem in Borderland’, interview, 20 January 2016.

None of these factors, however, has stopped government officials or anti-trafficking advocates from speculating about the dimensions of the trafficking issue, some going as far as claiming that twenty per cent of all trafficking victims in the US travel through this border state in the course of their journeys. A report from the Texas Advisory committee to the US Committee for Civil Rights identified Stanton as one the US most prominent cities for human trafficking activity, despite providing no details on the methods or data used to make this assertion.<sup>26</sup>

### ‘It’s All in their Brain’

Despite their focus, through my interactions with advocates I realise the women who receive their services do not always appear to have experienced trafficking-like conditions. In fact, their experiences and backgrounds vary widely. Although the majority of the clients are in fact of Mexican origin, this is primarily a result of the proximity of that country. On occasion, women from Asia and/or Europe may be referred for counselling or for help securing housing services, most often while they await immigration proceedings. It is in fact as a result and in the context of immigration enforcement activities that most women are referred to advocates’ services, their places of employment having been raided by immigration authorities, or the women themselves having been identified as being in the country irregularly, rather than them experiencing trafficking conditions.

The majority of the women that the advocates assist report having lived as irregular migrants on the American side of the border for long periods of time, most often in the company of family members and friends at the time of their arrest and referral to services. Others report crossing the border to and from Rio Viejo on a daily basis in order to work in the informal economy, performing childcare or housework. Only a handful of the women who receive services come in contact with advocates as a result of their involvement in the sex work market, and do so as prosecutorial witnesses and under court orders emerging from the investigation of alleged cases of trafficking.

These women most often report living on both sides of the border, supporting and taking care of their families. The majority appear to work

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<sup>26</sup> Texas Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights, *Human Trafficking in Texas: More resources and resolve needed to stem surge of modern day slavery: A report to the United States Commission on Civil Rights*, August 2011.

independently. Many have developed long-term relationships with clients who provide them with a consistent source of income or in-kind payment (purses, clothing, makeup) for their services. Younger women appear to be more likely to work with pimps while continuing to reside with family members, primarily on the American side of the border. Reports of exploitation, victimisation, or of restricted mobility are not common. In fact it appears most women referred to, or identified by the local anti-trafficking groups travel constantly to and from Stanton and Rio Viejo, having extensive familial ties in communities. Advocates repeatedly reported their frustration over the very ability of the women to travel without restrictions across the border, as this often led to them missing court dates or case-related appointments.

Despite the advocates' awareness of the vast range of experiences of the women they assist, they consistently refer to them in the meetings as young, migrant and foreign victims of trafficking. Although many of the women are in fact US citizens, or possess the ability to cross the border legally, the local trafficking narrative seeks to inscribe a specific identity to the victim: the young, unaccompanied, female migrant forcefully involved in the sex trade. The depiction, however, does not stop there. In the course of the trainings, advocates suggest that the women who receive their services present a particular condition as a result of their trafficking experience that renders them unable to identify their condition as victims, and which in turn demands—and justifies—intervention. As an advocate mentioned, 'it's all in their brain'.

While trauma has indeed been identified as a potential element and consequence of the trafficking experience—manifested through depression, significant memory loss, irregular sleep patterns, limited ability to maintain meaningful social relationships, etc.—in anti-trafficking meetings advocates suggest that the behaviour their clients present is a consequence of deeply engrained, subnormal cultural practices common among Mexican migrant women. These overgeneralised assertions—alongside graphic depictions of women's suffering and exploitation are used in presentations as unquestionable proof of victims as anomalous. The articulation of a specific gendered and racialised victim in the local anti-trafficking discourse reflects not just fears over the spread of trafficking in Stanton, but rather the collective anxieties over the presence of Mexican nationals in the city.



By mobilising scientific terminology common in trauma and victimisation literature, advocates craft a simplistic, yet powerful narrative of the trafficking victim as naïve, young and mentally unstable that resonates with the general public. Furthermore, the trope is specifically racialised, as victims of trafficking are monolithically described as foreign (a proxy for Mexican) which makes them inherently predisposed, as a result of their upbringing and culture, to behave inadequately or to lack the socialisation skills necessary for their proper integration. The advocates in turn—Mexican Americans residing on the American side of the border—construe as their moral duty the incorporation of victims into their new society (even when the majority have in fact lived and worked in the United States for long periods of time). In the process, sex work is increasingly vilified, as it is described by advocates as having rendered women ‘unable to develop healthy social relationships, to cope with their everyday life, acquire or develop new knowledge’.

In a confusing turn, anti-trafficking advocates use these narratives to position themselves as the ideal interlocutor between victims and the local community by virtue of sharing a common ethnicity. Advocates in fact often refer to their own background as an element that allows them to better understand the dynamics of the women referred to their services, with phrases like ‘We are also Spanish; we also speak Spanish and we understand where they come from’. Simultaneously, the advocates position their cultural capital as different from the women’s. In fact, the advocates’ ability to position themselves as culturally competent to provide help relies on the clear-cut, cultural othering of those they assist, their rhetoric often reflective of the anxieties over the women’s origins, practices and social ties and interactions. The women they assist are described as indeed irrational, and operating on the basis of pure instinct:

‘Victims have no working, rational brains. They are not dominated by reason, but rather by their emotions.’

According to the advocates, the levels of brain dysfunction existing among the women they assist limits the latter’s ability to think and to retrieve information—again, despite lacking psychiatric training or having the ability to diagnose mental illness. This, the public is told, is a result of women’s involvement in sex work.

‘Their brain works different (sic) and their memories are fragmented. [The sexual encounters in which they engaged] happened so much (sic) and so often that [the women] do not even remember they [took place.]’

Amid this rhetoric, the brains of women who sell sex emerge as being different from those of the rest of the ‘normal’ population, their ability to retrieve information being further compromised by their involvement in the provision of sexual services. In this context, participation in sex work is described as having a direct impact in the constitution of the female brain, even leading to memory loss. Statements of this nature not just further demonised sex work, but were used to produce pseudo-clinical justifications that further obscured the experiences of women, reducing their lives to their labour choices.<sup>27</sup>

While on the one hand advocates often referred to the extent of memory loss experienced by the women they worked with, they simultaneously cited the cases of women who recalled having been forced to engage in dozens, even hundreds of sexual encounters every night. Graphic stories of teens who reported having been raped in agricultural fields or inside lurid brothels helped not only to further construct and inscribe notions of the pervasiveness of sex trafficking, but also vilified those who purchase sex (who were in turn monolithically described as migrant men).

In addition to the racialised, othered ‘john’, a central character in the construction of the trafficking victim is the pimp. The pimp, audiences are told, ‘brainwashes’ the victim with false promises of love and attention, ‘tapping into her vulnerability, staging up scenarios, often in collusion with [other pimps] as a way to recruit (...) creating the illusion of safety and protection’. In the context of the presentations women are consistently depicted as desperately longing for the love and attention their working class, often dysfunctional families do not provide, becoming easy prey for exploiters, described in turn as men ‘from the border,’ who lure them with promises of love. Women—a senior advocate expressed with disgust—go as far as falling in love with their traffickers. ‘[The pimp] provides just a little bit of sugar. It is just that tiny little bit of sugar that tells the victim, well, perhaps this one reward was worth all the suffering.’

While the advocates rely on the characterisation of the trafficking victim as an easy to manipulate young and naïve teen unable to distinguish a ‘normal’ from an ‘abnormal’ relationship, their personal experiences with women referred to them following their “rescue” from trafficking situations are far from straightforward. Advocates express frustration over their interactions with teens and young adults who have opted for sex work as a way to support themselves and often their

<sup>27</sup> R Napier-Moore, ‘Revisiting Feminist Participatory Action Research: Because “a woman’s life is richer than her trafficking experience”’ in K Kempadoo, J Sanghera, and B Pattanaik (eds.), *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New perspectives on migration, sex work and human rights*, Second Edition, Paradigm, Boulder, 2005, p. 235.

family members. Rather than dealing with the docile women described in anti-trafficking presentations, advocates are often faced with the challenge of dealing with young women who have found in sex work an effective mechanism for their own economic survival and that of their families. However, in most cases, teens are referred to advocates not as a result of the former's involvement in sex work, but rather following attempts to run away from the parental home. At one of the events, one immigration officer reported with frustration how the mother of a young woman who was often at the advocates' shelter would call him every time her daughter went missing—another indicator that the women who come in contact with anti-trafficking advocates are far from experiencing trafficking conditions. While the services they provide do not necessarily target trafficking victims, advocates still perceive their role as that of moral guides, expressing how they 'are the ones who often need to teach them what normal is about'.

### 'Aliens from Mars'

References to women's place of origin abound during the presentations. While some advocates' statements seek to make reference to how on occasions, '[l]ife under normal conditions' may be foreign to an individual who has experienced intense levels of victimisation, others specifically referred to women as resembling 'aliens from Mars' as a way to describe how different their practices and behaviour were, further suggesting the otherisation of victims and their perception as foreign.

By emphasising victims' places of origin as foreign (even if their place of origin is only steps away in Rio Viejo) victim advocates often position Stanton as a superior, domestic and familiar space, and therefore as capable of providing the path into a more 'normal' life than the one victims had left behind in Mexico (this even though the majority of women assisted by advocates had a history of residing in both countries, had a long history of US residence, or on occasion had even lived and/or worked in cities larger and even more cosmopolitan than Stanton). Otherness is further constructed by describing the victims' places of origin as lacking the perceived advantages and comforts of the more civilised society, which allows for women to be depicted as in need of an intensive process of socialisation at the hands of the advocates:

'Being in a place where they can sleep and have food is foreign to them. They would rather be in the street, that is what they know. We teach them how to brush their teeth, to put on pyjamas to go to bed, to chill. One victim was even crying because she did not want to be [at the shelter].'

Advocates' statements also infantilise victims, who are described as being unable to conduct ordinary, everyday activities without their support. Women are systematically infantilised and described as having lacked social interactions allowing for a normal socialisation. Furthermore, being foreign is articulated as a disadvantage that renders women unable to function adequately in the context of an American city.

'You have to guide them by the hand. She can't make any appointments she needs. She does not know what she needs to do.'

'Before they arrived to Stanton, they did not even own a phone. We must guide them by the hand so that they learn how to take the bus on their own. We take them to school. We try to engage them in school, to [foster] whatever interest that they may have.'

## Conclusion

While the global panic over the spread of human trafficking has reached the US-Mexico border, it is reflective of its local communities' anxieties. In this paper, I described a series of observations involving the activities of a local anti-trafficking coalition seeking to generate awareness in the community of Stanton, a large city on the border in the US state of Texas, over the spread of 'modern-day slavery'. I sought to identify how the coalition—constituted in part by a group of Mexican American women—constructed the persona of the trafficking victim. On the surface, it appeared as if the coalition was simply mobilising the common trope of the young, naïve and foreign women at the mercy of exploitative networks of pimps operating in the shadows. Yet documentation from news coverage on anti-trafficking meetings, participant observation and archival research revealed that the contemporary narratives of trafficking were in fact a reflection and a continuation of the long standing historical anxieties over the presence of Mexican nationals in the US. Trafficking victims were in fact identified—and racialised—as Mexican in a fashion that situated their country as underdeveloped, even primitive. This effort has also relied on the mobilisation of a pseudo-scientific trope which designates the brains of trafficking victims as abnormal.

Who are the women who enter into contact with the anti-trafficking advocates? They do not appear to fit into the simplistic categories created by the advocates. Most often they were women who were arrested during police raids at their places of employment or in the course of an investigation related to immigration violation charges prior to being referred to the advocates for case management purposes.

Despite the narratives mobilised in victim advocates' awareness meetings, the majority of the women identified by the local anti-trafficking groups were not in trafficking situations, but had maintained long, stable periods of residence on both sides of the border alongside friends and family members through the effective use and knowledge of legal border crossing strategies. In other words, the women receiving services were far from simplistically falling within the narrow categories of 'recently arrived migrant' or 'forced sex slave'. Rather, most have managed to live in Stanton in a fashion that allowed them to strengthen longstanding, bi-national social ties. These dynamics were not foreign to the victim advocates.

The observations suggest that the trafficking victim created by the prostitution abolitionist discourse is in most instances not only inaccurate but inexistent. Human trafficking awareness trainings in Stanton reflect the city's collective anxieties over the presence of Mexican residents, rather than concerns over the spectre of trafficking. This is evidenced by the ways in which the figure of the trafficking victim involves not only the image of the young, naïve woman prone to exploitation and manipulation, but instead a specific body—that of the female, Mexican migrant. In a community where the large majority of the population shares the same ethnic background despite the existence of the border, human trafficking rhetoric mobilises a racialised hierarchy that seeks to restore an apparent 'social order'. Human trafficking advocacy efforts emerge therefore as a new way for Mexican Americans to reassert a sense of racial, ethnic and moral difference over Mexican nationals without having to address the very conditions of inequality both groups have historically faced as people of the border. Furthermore, by identifying victims as such, conversations over migrant rights and the need to provide protection to those with valid asylum cases become at least on the surface, unnecessary.

Advocacy around human trafficking on the border does not constitute an attempt for social justice or to address moral wrongdoings, but rather seeks to socialise the poor into new roles and obligations, perceived as appropriate by the majority. In this sense, the sudden interest in human trafficking in Stanton reveals the collective anxiety over the presence of Mexican nationals and constitutes an effort to restore and preserve idealised notions of victimhood, but also of American identity amid the collective struggles over race and class relations in the US.

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# Looking Beyond ‘White Slavery’: Trafficking, the Jewish Association, and the dangerous politics of migration control in England, 1890-1910

*Rachael Attwood*

## Abstract

This article seeks to revise Jo Doezema’s suggestion that ‘the white slave’ was the only dominant representation of ‘the trafficked woman’ used by early anti-trafficking advocates in Europe and the United States, and that discourses based on this figure of injured innocence are the only historical discourses that are able to shine light on contemporary anti-trafficking rhetoric. ‘The trafficked woman’ was a figure painted using many shades of grey in the past, with a number of injurious consequences, not only for trafficked persons but also for female labour migrants and migrant populations at large. In England, dominant organisational portrayals of ‘the trafficked woman’ had acquired these shades by the 1890s, when trafficking started to proliferate amid mass migration from Continental Europe, and when controversy began to mount over the migration of various groups of working-class foreigners to the country.

This article demonstrates these points by exploring the way in which the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women (JAPGW), one of the pillars of England’s early anti-trafficking movement, represented the female Jewish migrants it deemed at risk of being trafficked into sex work between 1890 and 1910. It argues that the JAPGW stigmatised these women, placing most of the blame for trafficking upon them and positioning them to a greater or a lesser extent as ‘undesirable and undeserving working-class foreigners’ who could never become respectable English women. It also contends that the JAPGW, in outlining what was wrong with certain female migrants, drew a line between ‘the migrant’ and respectable English society at large, and paradoxically endorsed the extension of the very ‘anti-alienist’ and Antisemitic prejudices that it strove to dispel.

**Keywords:** human trafficking, ‘white slavery’, sex work, migration, Jewish, England, history

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## Introduction

Jo Doezema has made an exceptional contribution to our understanding of the intimate link between historical and present-day representations of trafficking in the sex sector. She has thrown light on the continued significance of 'the myth of "white slavery"' that was used by anti-trafficking advocates in Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 'White slavery', Doezema argues, was a discursive construction hinged on the idea that trafficked women are naïve and innocent victims (or 'white slaves'), often young and working class, who have been forced into organised sex work by 'evil foreigners'. As the dominant means of representing trafficking in anti-trafficking circles, it entrenched a distinction between 'good, unwilling trafficking victims' and 'bad, complicit trafficked others', which stigmatised women who chose or consented to migrate for sex work as unworthy of protection and worthy of punishment. The re-emergence of 'white slavery' in anti-trafficking discourses in the 1980s, Doezema continues, has caused this dangerous distinction to prevail in key representations of trafficking, and to carry on endangering sex workers and compromising their rights.<sup>1</sup>

While cogent and lucid in many respects, Doezema's pioneering analysis is, however, missing some important shades of grey—especially when it comes to historical representations of trafficking. In this article, I seek to challenge Doezema's work on three fronts. Firstly, I will demonstrate that 'white' was not the only colour used by early anti-trafficking advocates to paint 'the trafficking victim'. Secondly, I will show that distinctions between unwilling and complicit trafficked women were just one of many detrimental distinctions made by these advocates when representing trafficking, and that ideas of nation and 'foreignness', class, and gender cut in many directions and carried many significances in influential depictions of trafficking. Thirdly, in doing so, I will suggest that we need to look beyond 'white slavery' and examine historical constructions of trafficking more closely in order to understand contemporary anti-trafficking discourses. I draw my

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<sup>1</sup> J Doezema, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters: The construction of trafficking*, Zed Books, London, 2010; *Idem*, 'Loose Women or Lost Women? The re-emergence of the myth of white slavery in contemporary discourses of trafficking in women', *Gender Issues*, vol.18, 1999, pp. 23—50.

evidence from a case study of historical representations of trafficking in England—a country that Doezenia refers to as one of the first strongholds and a principal breeding ground of ‘white slavery’ rhetoric. I hope that, by shining light on the limits to Doezenia’s theory in such a key territory, scholars will turn to other supposed historical centres of ‘white slavery’ rhetoric—not least the United States—and confront the discourses used by early anti-trafficking activists with a fresh, critical perspective.

For most of the period spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the very period that Doezenia suggests was the heyday of ‘white slavery’ rhetoric—‘white slavery’ had virtually no purchase in constructions of trafficking in England. Nor did representations of ‘trafficking victims’ as unwilling innocents who were in no way responsible for entering organised sex work. Certainly, ‘white slavery’ rhetoric did exercise great influence in isolated moments of controversy in England between 1880 (the year when the country’s first trafficking scandal erupted) and 1914, and did, during these moments, prompt the distinction between non-consenting and consenting trafficked women that Doezenia describes. However, from around 1890, the key groupings in the national and international anti-trafficking movements mobilised considerably different enmeshed ideas of race, class, gender, and sexuality to those that featured in ‘white slavery’ discourses, and made considerably different distinctions, with no less a dangerous outcome for trafficked women. Ironically, these groupings were influenced by similar impulses that Doezenia suggests were behind configurations of ‘white slavery’—the desire to restore community identity in the face of the ‘damage’ supposedly wrought by women vying for increasing sexual and economic independence, and negating their ‘natural role’ as the guarantors of domesticity and national prosperity, by immigrants, by foreigners and/or by ‘foreign’ belief systems.<sup>2</sup> However, the parties they exalted or demonised when representing trafficking were not the same, and the injurious consequences of their representations, were, if anything, broader and more acute. This discursive departure is intimately linked to the fact that, by 1890, trafficking in the sex sector had started to proliferate amid mass migration from Continental Europe, and anxiety had begun to mount over the increasing influx into England of certain groups of working-class foreigners.

I will expand upon these points by analysing the way in which one of the key pillars of England’s early anti-trafficking movement, the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women (JAPGW), represented the very women and girls it claimed to be committed to protecting from

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



being trafficked. I focus on the Association's discourses relating to trafficking in England, including annual reports, public addresses, and published warnings, between 1890 and 1910—the period in which the Association's anti-trafficking programme took shape. My argument regarding the Association is a simple one: while making a great practical contribution to the English and the global anti-trafficking movements, the JAPGW represented trafficking as a largely victim-instigated crime—a form of 'self-slavery' as opposed to 'white slavery'—and, in doing so, caused considerable damage, on an ideological front, to not only trafficked women, women 'at risk' of being trafficked, and women migrating to engage in sex work, but also the migrant population from which these women came. The JAPGW, a group composed of wealthy members of

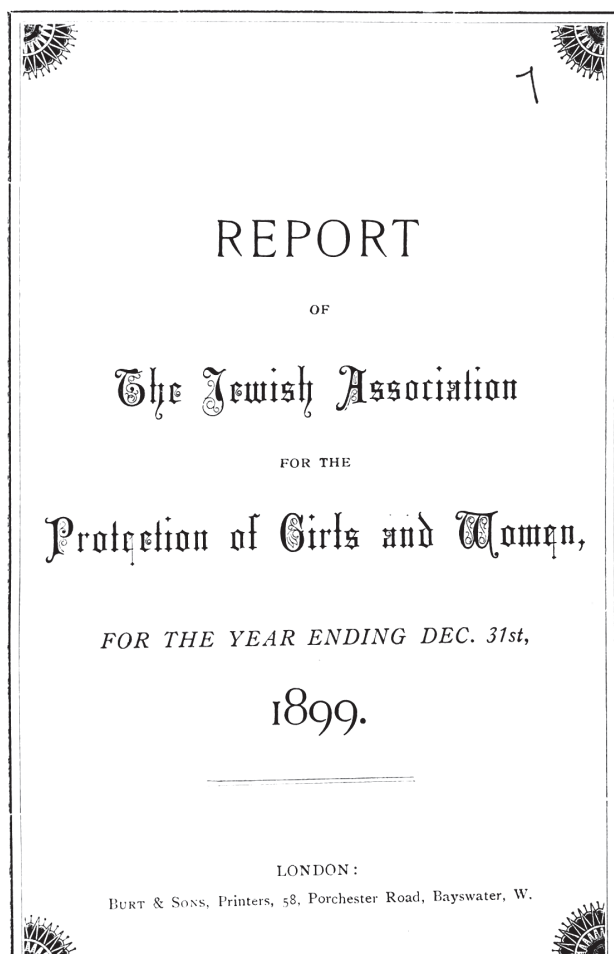


Figure 1.

the Anglo-Jewish community, portrayed working-class female migrants who travelled to the country alone in search of work as the women who were most likely to succumb to trafficking. It cast them as intellectually and morally deficient ‘others’ who, by leaving home, negating their ‘womanly duty’ as wives and mothers, and entering England in search of a better life, had rendered themselves susceptible to abuse. They had, according to the JAPGW, all but served themselves up to the skilled opportunists who orchestrated trafficking, by daring to access freedoms and resources to which they were not, as poor foreign women, entitled. Curiously, whilst acknowledging the different circumstances through which women found themselves selling sex abroad, the Association did not, as we might today, rigorously distinguish between women at risk of being trafficked, migratory sex workers, and women who elected to enter sex work post migration, when conceptualising ‘trafficking’. In its eyes, all women engaging in sex work away from their home countries, whether they had elected to do so or not, were women who had got themselves caught up in some form of third party-orchestrated ‘immoral traffic’.<sup>3</sup> The Association, as such, defined women at risk of ‘being trafficked’ as women who were likely to fall into some form of organised sex work abroad, through their moral shortcomings but not necessarily purely through their agency.

The JAPGW did identify different shades of women at risk of being trafficked among the female Jewish migrant population. The more economically and sexually independent a working-class female migrant was, the more ‘foreign’ and culpable for any harm caused to her person it considered her to be. This, however, was one of the minor distinctions the JAPGW established in its discourses. A major distinction forged by the Association was between working-class female migrants, as liabilities who had no place in England, and respectable English women, as their moral and intellectual superiors who would not, and could not, render themselves prone to being trafficked for they ‘knew their place’. Another key distinction was between what it saw as the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ foreign poor, based on its interpretation of the level of culpability of women at risk of being trafficked. A final fundamental distinction it made was between all working-class migrants in England and respectable English society as a whole. By representing ‘the female foreigner prone to being trafficked’ in such a pointed manner, the JAPGW

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<sup>3</sup> JAPGW *Annual Report*, 1904, pp. 7–8.

effectively corroborated and extended the prejudices against foreign migrants—the ‘anti-alienist’ sentiments—that were simmering in turn-of-the-century England. It underlined the supposed common sense of restricting the immigration of ‘undesirable aliens’ (those not deemed sufficiently wealthy, healthy, and ‘respectable’ to avoid being a burden upon state and society). Paradoxically, it also made inroads into undermining the Association’s overarching goal of protecting the reputation of England’s wider Jewish community.

Thus, for at least twenty years, the ‘white slavery’ rhetoric was abandoned by a dominant force in England’s early anti-trafficking movement. The sympathetic figure of the ‘young and helpless’ English ‘white slave’ that had been used in the early 1880s by anti-trafficking advocates such as Alfred Stace Dyer to portray what was a minor traffic between England and the licensed brothels of the near Continent, was not fit for purpose by the 1890s. Nor was the Manichean separation that had been forged between the English ‘white slave’ and the ‘Continental debauchés’ orchestrating her exploitation.<sup>4</sup> The majority of trafficked women (at least according to the JAPGW’s definition of the term) were foreign. Moreover, fears over immigration and the perceived damage caused to English society by foreigners combined with fears regarding women’s independence in such a way as to prompt groups like the JAPGW to deny ‘the working class female migrant’ victim status firstly, for being foreign, and, secondly, for striking out on her own away from her home country. Finally, the fact that many trafficked women and migratory sex workers were Jewish made it politically dangerous for the JAPGW to express much sympathy for them. Indeed, it is likely that members of the Association chose to define ‘trafficking’ so broadly to emphasise how much of a grave foreign problem they faced.

England’s first non-denominational anti-trafficking organisations have been the subject of a number of excellent critical analyses.<sup>5</sup> The JAPGW,

<sup>4</sup> A S Dyer, *The European Slave Trade in English Girls*, Dyer Brothers, London, 1880, pp. 33–34.

<sup>5</sup> S A Limoncelli, *The Politics of Trafficking: The first international movement to combat the sexual exploitation of women*, Stanford NJ, Stanford University Press, 2010; P Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention and reform in England, 1870–1914*, Routledge, London 2000, pp. 155–73; J Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens: Commercial sex in London, 1885–1960*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2012, pp. 100–115; R Attwood, ‘Stopping the Traffic: The National Vigilance Association and the international fight against the “white slave” trade (1899–C. 1909)’, *Women’s History Review*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2015, pp. 325–50.

however, has not received the same treatment. In this article, as well as revising Doezeema's argument, I will add a new angle to the insightful analyses of the JAPGW conducted by Edward Bristow, Lloyd P Gartner, and Paul Knepper respectively, which tend to commemorate the JAPGW's anti-trafficking initiatives, rather than interrogating the group's representations and rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> Before embarking on this analysis, however, some background information about the nature of trafficking in England during the period in question is required. So too is more detail about the JAPGW, the pressures it faced as a Jewish group in turn-of-the-century England, and the motivation behind its anti-trafficking programme.

## Trafficking in England

By the 1890s, prevailing circumstances had enabled a series of trafficking networks to take root across the world. In 1873, the so-called 'Long Depression', a global downturn that would last nearly twenty-five years, set in, bringing reduced industrial growth and widespread unemployment to many European countries.<sup>7</sup> Over the next decade, a series of pogroms erupted against Jews in the Pale of Settlement (the area to which most Jews in the Russian Empire were circumscribed), and Tsar Alexander III enacted laws that *inter alia* further restricted Jews' economic activity. This discrimination lasted three decades and occurred alongside simmering Antisemitism across a number of Continental European countries.<sup>8</sup> To many, especially the young, leaving for places that promised better financial prospects, and of course, safety, became a necessity. Facilitated by developments in transport technologies, mass-migration began from Europe in the 1880s. Within the throng were hundreds of female migrants who travelled, often under the auspices of third parties, to work in the organised commercial sex industries that were thriving in many of the destinations favoured by migrants, including New York, Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, and in key sites of the British Empire such as Alexandria, Johannesburg, and eastwards, Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta

<sup>6</sup> E J Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish fight against white slavery, 1870-1939*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1982, pp. 111—324; L P Gartner, 'Anglo-Jewry and the Jewish International Traffic in Prostitution, 1885 – 1914', *AJS Review*, vol. 7—8, 1982, pp. 129—178; P Knepper, 'British Jews and the Racialisation of Crime in the Age of Empire', *British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 47, 2006, pp. 61—79.

<sup>7</sup> F P Miller, A F Vandome and J McBrewster, *Long Depression*, Saarbrücken, VDM Publishing, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> B Nathan, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish encounter with late Imperial Russia*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 2004.

(Kolkata), Rangoon (Yangon), Colombo, Singapore and Hong Kong. Many of these women were exposed to sexual abuse and coercion by those organising their sex work, and/or by those paying for sex with them.<sup>9</sup>

England was a prime conduit in westward trafficking networks, housing the major passenger ports of Hull, London, Southampton, and Liverpool. It was also, albeit on a small scale, a place where women were recruited for onward transportation to overseas brothels, as well as a destination for trafficked women to engage in sex work. Much of this type of trafficking activity took place in London and particularly London's East End, where most East European Jews, then the country's biggest immigrant group, had settled. Some also took place in cities such as Manchester, Liverpool, and Leeds that had sizeable immigrant populations.<sup>10</sup> England, moreover, housed two of the leading forces in the international fight against trafficking. The first was the National Vigilance Association (NVA), a multid denominational group, whose male luminaries, from 1899, founded and dominated both the nascent International Congress set up to tackle trafficking, and the Congress' permanent body, the International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons.<sup>11</sup> The second was the JAPGW, which as well as participating in the Bureau, oversaw a significant Jewish anti-trafficking network at home and abroad via its Gentlemen's Committee.

<sup>9</sup> There is a rich literature on the trafficking activity witnessed at some of these locations, for example H Fischer-Tiné, "White Women Degrading Themselves to the Lowest Depths": European networks of prostitution and colonial anxieties in British India and Ceylon Ca. 1880-1914', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, vol. 40, 2003, pp. 163—90; P Levine, 'The White Slave Trade and the British Empire', *Criminal Justice History*, vol. 17, 2002, pp. 133—46; D J Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, family and nation in Argentina*, Lincoln NE, University of Nebraska Press, 1991; Bristow, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> For illustrative cases of both international trafficking activity and trafficking activity within Britain see *National Vigilance Association (NVA) Annual Reports of the Executive Committee*, 1890–1914; NVA, Minute Books of the Executive Committee, 1886–1914; Records of the NVA, The Women's Library@LSE, London, 4NVA/1/1/01-05; *Jewish Association for Girls and Women (JAPGW) Annual Reports*, 1898–1914; JAPGW, Minute Book of the Gentlemen's Sub-Committee for Preventive Work, 19 January 1890–8 November 1896, Papers of the JAPGW, Jewish Care Archive, Hartley Library, University of Southampton [hereafter JAPGW, HL], MS173 2/2/1.

<sup>11</sup> Attwood, 2015; Limoncelli, 2010.

## The JAPGW

What became known as the JAPGW was founded in 1885 by Lady Constance Battersea, the daughter of Sir Anthony de Rothschild, a banker and landowner at the apogee of the Anglo-Jewish elite. It was established in response to the lack of provision in London for Jewish girls from the poor immigrant community who had found themselves in supposedly adverse moral circumstances, be it engaging in sex work, having a child outside of marriage, and/or showing signs of general ‘waywardness’.<sup>12</sup> Battersea and a group of women also from the wealthy, well-connected ‘cousinhood’ of England’s assimilated Jewish community, embarked on a charitable programme focused on ‘prevention, and as far as possible, redemption’.<sup>13</sup> They organised an expanding group of ‘training homes’ and reformatories, and a lodging house for newly-arrived female Jewish migrants. Battersea was given considerable practical assistance by her cousin, the philanthropist and religious scholar Claude Montefiore. Both followed Reform Judaism, a progressive variation of Judaism that emphasised women’s role in religious life, and cast ‘Jewishness’ as a spiritual and cultural, rather than a racial, status.<sup>14</sup> These ideas, however, as we shall see, had limited resonance in the Association’s principal representations of trafficking. From its early days, the JAPGW engaged in anti-trafficking work of sorts, hiring a dock agent to meet passenger liners arriving in London, and interrogate and, where needed, offer its services to lone, female Jewish migrants who were in ‘default of destinations’, with ‘undecipherable addresses’ or en route to another country.<sup>15</sup> In 1889, it established a Gentlemen’s Committee to co-ordinate this work. The JAPGW deemed the practical fight against trafficking a distinctly ‘male pursuit’. Battersea on occasion spoke on the topic of trafficking alongside members of the Gentlemen’s Committee at conferences organised or attended by the JAPGW. However, the sexual division of labour within the Association was such that Battersea’s female colleagues were typically tasked with coordinating the care and instruction of Jewish migrant girls in the JAPGW’s many homes—a role that was deemed appropriately maternal, domestic, and respectable for women of their station. The association’s men, in contrast, were to take on the supposedly more dangerous,

<sup>12</sup> Lady C Battersea, *Reminiscences*, London, Macmillan, 1922, pp. 418—9.

<sup>13</sup> *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1899, p.8; *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1908, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Battersea, pp. 409—25.

<sup>15</sup> See *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1898, pp. 8—9.

difficult, and public role of overseeing front-line anti-trafficking work, planning a preventive strategy, helping ensnare traffickers, and lobbying for legal amendments. Under Arthur Moro, another cousin, the Gentlemen's Committee soon placed agents at key ports and railway stations across the country. It established branches and/or gained the support of Jewish communities in all major port cities, and in cities that housed large Jewish immigrant populations.<sup>16</sup> The Gentlemen's Committee also strove to bring about convictions of traffickers and pimps, and lobbied for tighter laws to punish these parties. From around 1899, the Association organised short-lived Jewish anti-trafficking initiatives in Johannesburg, Alexandria, and Calcutta, and in 1900 founded a successful branch in Buenos Aires.<sup>17</sup> In 1910, the JAPGW manifested its authority among fellow Jewish anti-trafficking groups by hosting the first Jewish International Conference on trafficking in London.

## Pressures and Motivations

The JAPGW was an Association under pressure. The increasing number of Jewish immigrants settling in the country engendered acute localised hostility, particularly in London's East End, an already poverty-stricken district. The impact of the newcomers on the local housing and labour markets, and the supposedly exploitative practices of immigrant landlords and sweatshop owners, riled many East End residents, and in 1902 spawned the first populist anti-immigration group, The British Brothers' League. Middle-class anti-alienists, including Arnold White, invoked generations-old Antisemitic calumny, and especially images of (male) Jews as venal parasites, to argue that Jewish immigrants represented a noxious 'race apart' that needed to be excised from England. In his 1899 diatribe *The Modern Jew*, White warned, '[i]f the Jew be essentially parasitic in character and habits; if he can only live by exploiting the vices or preying on the weaknesses of others;...then the conclusion is irresistible that...the [Jewish] race is disqualified from settlement among civilized communities'.<sup>18</sup> The 1905 Aliens Act, which

<sup>16</sup> JAPGW *Annual Report*, 1899, pp. 16—23.

<sup>17</sup> JAPGW *Annual Report*, 1899, pp. 23—4; JAPGW *Annual Report*, 1904, pp. 22—6; JAPGW *Annual Report*, 1905, pp. 23—4, 30.

<sup>18</sup> A White, *The Modern Jew*, New York, Frederick A Stokes, 1899, pp. 12—13. See also D Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European disorder, c.1848 – c.1918*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 214—5; D Feldman, 'The Importance of Being English: Jewish immigration and the decay of Liberal England' in D Feldman and G Stedman Jones (eds.), *Metropolis, London: Histories and representations since 1800*, London, Routledge, 1989, pp. 56—84.

denied entry into the country, or sanctioned the expulsion, of foreign subjects who had attained serious criminal convictions, who were impoverished or who were in ill-health, did not suppress these prejudices, and prompted focus on ‘the criminal alien’.<sup>19</sup> Antisemitism was not stirred simply by the experience of immigration. Drawing upon deep-rooted ideas of Jews’ avarice, treachery, and secret influence, the prominent Liberal JA Hobson and many of his peers blamed the South African War of 1899-1902 on ‘a class of financial capitalists of which the foreign Jew must be taken as the leading type’.<sup>20</sup> This occurred alongside more pronounced manifestations of hatred towards Jews in France, Germany, Austria, and, of course, Imperial Russia.

One might be forgiven for thinking that the JAPGW embarked upon its domestic anti-trafficking operations, first and foremost, out of concern for the welfare and good name of all Jews in England, in the face of this mounting threat, especially given that Jewish people had long held a reputation for chastity and moral purity.<sup>21</sup> These impulses doubtlessly influenced its agenda. As Claude Montefiore put it in 1902, ‘The fact...that Jews and Jewesses were doing their utmost to combat this horrible trade would...be the best antidote for anti-Semitism [sic]’.<sup>22</sup> However, the Association’s campaign against trafficking—both in practical and ideological terms—is better understood as a politicised mechanism of ‘Jewish community control’, directed by Anglo-Jewry at the section of the impoverished foreign Jewish population it deemed most problematic—lone female labour migrants. Based upon a double standard of sexual morality that was by no means exceptional in English society of the day, its campaign was started when immigration was unregulated, and continued, from 1905, alongside state-run immigration restriction, to suppress the danger seemingly posed by these women and so safeguard the place of the assimilated Jewish elite in England.

From the vantage point of Anglo-Jewry, the Jewish (im)migrant population, fresh from the *shtetls* (rural Jewish villages) of Eastern Europe, speaking Yiddish, wearing the ‘old fashioned’ garb of Orthodox Jews, carrying the religious and social habits of their hitherto

<sup>19</sup> 1905 Aliens Act, 5 Edward VII, c.13; D Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social relations and political culture 1840-1914*, Newhaven NJ, Yale University Press, 1994.

<sup>20</sup> J A Hobson, *The War in South Africa: Its causes and effects*, London, Nisbet, 1900, p. 189.

<sup>21</sup> *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1908, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes of Council, 11 February 1902, JAPGW, HL, MS 173, 2/3/1.



‘peasantish’ lives, seemed decidedly foreign, ostensibly and morally, and therefore potentially dangerous. That its number was rumoured to be involved in crime, anarchy, and organised vice, and, crucially, was poor (a status that was itself racialised in turn-of-the-century culture) compounded this impression.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, to secure their elevated status within the country, members of the Anglo-Jewish elite were compelled to act, publically and boldly, to police the Jewish migrants it held responsible for trafficking. They wanted to show through their actions and words that good English Jews ought not be tarred with the same brush as the bad foreign Jews embroiled in organised vice, and were as appalled and determined to act against trafficking as others in respectable society. The JAPGW’s representation of the Jewish women it deemed prone to being trafficked makes it plain which migrants the Association considered among the most detrimental to the country and most dangerous to Anglo-Jewry’s privileged position. To be clear, the Association did not focus on female Jewish migrants because it saw them as the most vulnerable members of the country’s wider Jewish community *per se*. Rather, it focused on them because it saw them as the persons most likely, through their very presence in England, to cause upset to English Jews. The JAPGW did recognise that women of all denominations could be and were being trafficked for sex work. To it, trafficking was never simply a ‘Jewish problem’. However, bearing in mind its remit and the ideas of gender that coloured the outlook of the Gentlemen’s Committee, the JAPGW focused its actions and words on the female Jewish migrants participating in trafficking.

## Potential Victim #1: The foreign fledgling

The type of female Jewish migrant the Association held most at risk of being trafficked, and the type upon whom it focused by far the most attention, discursively and practically, was the foreign fledgling. She, according to the Association, was a benighted, unworldly young woman, if not a girl, who had left her family and her village in the Pale of Settlement on a whim, in the hope of a bright new life abroad. She was likely to fall victim either by being duped by the romantic proposals and extravagant offers of a trafficker in her home country or by embarking overseas through her misguided ambition, unaccompanied and

<sup>23</sup> M Rozin, *The Rich and the Poor: Jewish philanthropic and social control in nineteenth-century London*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 1999; Feldman, 1989.

unprepared, only to later succumb to similar overtures. She was not cast as a potential ‘white slave’ whose innocence and purity had been taken advantage of by an unscrupulous individual, as in the discourses of trafficking that had prevailed in England in the early 1880s when trafficking was supposed to be a foreign scourge on English ‘white slaves’.<sup>24</sup> Instead, she was cast as a credulous foreign ‘other’ whose natural mental and moral defects had rendered her prone to abuse. This is evident in the Association’s observations of young women who had been trafficked. ‘The victims are often very weak, ignorant and helpless’, it proclaimed in its 1904 Report, ‘...constantly devoid of moral fibre, lacking religious teaching, of low education’.<sup>25</sup> An aspect of the representation of the foreign fledgling the JAPGW particularly laboured in its annual report was her materialism and vanity. In 1905, the Association highlighted the role of ‘dazzling promises of good situations and large wages’ in poor Jewish girls being trafficked from the Pale of Settlement, and in 1908 it described how procurers working among London’s foreign Jews ‘get hold of girls of sixteen and seventeen years of age, and by flattery, presents and promises induce them to misconduct themselves and finally to leave their homes’.<sup>26</sup>

The Association also emphasised the role of the *stille huppah* (a marriage conducted away from officialdom) in its explanation of how the foreign fledgling often found herself a victim of trafficking. In Orthodox Judaism, wives were to obey their husbands, and the dissolution of marriages by women was prohibited. Estranged wives were effectively ostracised from the religious community.<sup>27</sup> In 1907, it revealed to its subscribers, ‘[w]e have mostly to deal with foreign girls, who do not understand the requirements of the English law with regard to marriage, and if one of them has not been in this country long and has had no proper guiding hand to help her, she sees nothing wrong in the proposal of a Stille Chuppa [sic], which is probably the commencement of her downfall...When the proposal is made to the girl to travel to some foreign country, she dare not refuse’.<sup>28</sup>

The supposed intellectual and moral deficiencies of the foreign fledgling, not to mention her sheer ‘foreignness’, were emphasised by the JAPGW

<sup>24</sup> For a key example of the use of the ‘white slavery’ metaphor see Dyer, 1880.

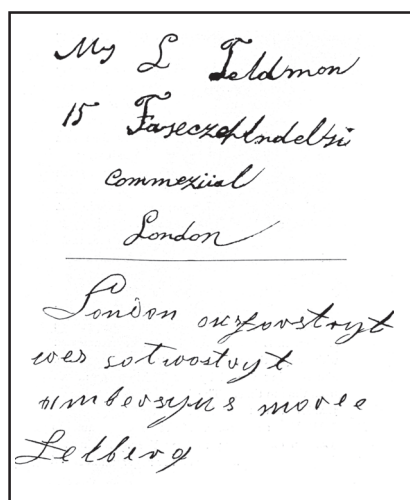
<sup>25</sup> *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1904, pp. 7–8.

<sup>26</sup> *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1905, p. 25; *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1908, p. 15.

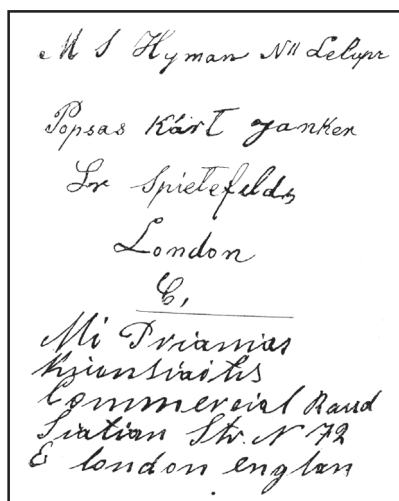
<sup>27</sup> See D Englander, ‘Stille Huppah (Quiet Marriage) among Immigrant Jews in Britain’, *The Journal of Jewish Sociology*, vol. 34, 1992, pp. 85–109.

<sup>28</sup> *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1907, pp. 21–3.

in nearly every one of its annual reports during the period, through illustrations of the undecipherable or, as it called them, ‘imperfect’ addresses given to the Association’s travellers’ aid workers by young female migrants. ‘It might be thought that when the girls arrive with the addresses written out and safely treasured, the Dock Agent’s work would be a comparatively simple one’, the JAPGW declared when reflecting upon its work in 1898, ‘but this is not always the case. It would puzzle many of our readers if they were asked to conduct a girl to: No.5, Quns Beldnksgs, Goshe St Betinalen, gren Rout E, London England...It required some ingenuity on the part of Sternheim [the JAPGW’s London dock agent] to recognise the [address as]: Queen’s Buildings, Gossett Street, Bethnal Green Road’.<sup>29</sup> In otherwise un-illustrated volumes, the JAPGW often also went to the trouble of printing facsimile copies of crudely written and phonetically-spelled addresses with accompanying commentary. (See Figures 2 and 3) At no point did the JAPGW encourage empathy regarding the fact that female Jewish migrants were used to writing Yiddish in Hebrew script (if they could write at all). These girls’ difficulty with written English was interpreted by the Association as a mental deficiency.



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Figures 2 and 3.

<sup>29</sup> JAPGW Annual Report, 1898, p. 52.

Significantly, the foreign fledgling was portrayed as likely to fall into the hands of the trafficker not simply because she had left home in search of a better life, but because she had been allowed to do so. The Association attributed her susceptibility to being trafficked to her ‘faulty upbringing’ or ‘poor parentage’, casting a combination of national difference and class difference as equating to innate inferiority.<sup>30</sup> Addressing the 1910 Jewish International Conference, Moro bemoaned the ‘ignorant and credulous parents’ of the girls targeted by procurers in the Pale of Settlement, not least because they ‘lend a too-willing ear to the representations’ of the procurers.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the Association included tables in its annual reports showing the extent of the burden of what it termed ‘unprotected’ migrant girls that it had to bear each year. (See Figure 4) Along with providing general travellers’ aid services at ports and railway stations, the JAPGW’s solution to this supposed burden was to give select foreign fledglings temporary assistance before sending them back home or on to a suitable destination.

	1899.	1898.	1897.
Total number of unprotected girls assisted ... ..	655	364	315
Girls left at the Home in default of destinations, or because of imperfect addresses ... ..	145	93	60
Girls conducted to ships, railway stations, or to addresses in London	510	271	255
Non-Jewesses assisted (included in the above figures) ... ..	70	41	30
Unprotected children assisted (ages varying from 3½ to 12) ... ..	25		

Figure 4.

<sup>30</sup> JAPGW *Annual Report*, 1904, pp. 7–8; *Vigilance Record*, August 1891, pp. 80–1.  
<sup>31</sup> Moro cited in JAPGW, *Jewish International Conference on the Suppression of the Traffic in Girls and Women, 1910*, London, JAPGW, 1910, pp. 93–4.

Importantly, while the JAGPW strove to police what it saw as the most problematic section of the Jewish migrant population and so safeguard Anglo-Jewry, the way in which the Association represented women at risk of being trafficked was not first and foremost rooted in its identity as a Jewish group. Rather, the JAPGW's representations emanated above all from its identity as an upper middle-class, socially conservative English grouping. The core assumptions and prejudices that found expression in the JAPGW's representations were echoed by the bourgeois executive of the country's Christian-leaning (yet officially multid denominational) anti-trafficking group, the NVA. The *Vigilance Record*, the NVA's journal, regularly featured stories of 'naïve' foreign girls, implicitly from Christian backgrounds, who had walked into the clutches of traffickers, often on the promise of 'plenty of money, jewels, and fine dresses' in a new life abroad.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the JAPGW, along with the NVA, drew heavily upon discourses of the threat posed by women's independence, and by girls' 'wayward' desires and materialism that had resonance in English society, thanks largely to middle-class moralists and commentators.<sup>33</sup> According to Sally Ledger, fears over working-class women's independence were particularly acute at the turn of the century owing to mounting female participation in militant trade unionism.<sup>34</sup> The JAPGW, moreover, rehearsed large parts of discourses of the sexual danger of women's mobility that had resonated in England regarding domestic labour migration from the late eighteenth century, and regarding English girls' foreign labour migration since the country's first international trafficking scandal in 1880.<sup>35</sup> It simply replaced 'the English woman or girl' with 'the Jewish female migrant' as the subject of each discourse and ramped up the severity of the 'threat' in question based on the significance it attached to the Jewish migrant's foreignness.

## Potential Victim #2: The immoral migrant

Albeit at the very margins of its discourses, the JAPGW identified another type of foreign Jewish woman susceptible to being abused

<sup>32</sup> See for example *Vigilance Record*, August 1903, pp. 3–4; *Vigilance Record*, February 1904, p. 3; *Vigilance Record*, April 1902, p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> See P Cox, *Gender, Justice, and Welfare: Bad girls in Britain, 1900-1950*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2003, pp. 1–16, 37–50; Bristow 1982, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> S Ledger, *Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997, pp. 47–8.

<sup>35</sup> LA Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian London*, Routledge, London 1999, pp. 14–15.

through ‘trafficking’—the immoral migrant. This figure was cast as a sexually experienced woman who had travelled to England from the Pale of Settlement, with a third party, specifically to pursue her ‘vocation’ in vice. She was a more cognizant, calculating, corrupt, and, therefore, dangerous cousin of the foreign fledgling—the very worst of the genus of young working-class female foreigner and a figure far removed from ‘the white slave’. The NVA was a vociferous supporter of legislation to restrict immigration into England and frequently included vitriolic descriptions of ‘vicious alien prostitutes’ in its public discourses. The JAPGW, however, given its driving motivation and its desire to morally police (im)migrant Jewish women and girls without relying on state intervention, was more cautious when referring to its foreign co-religionists who had migrated to engage in sex work. It made discrete, if unambiguous, references to the fact that some trafficking victims were ‘sometimes not unwilling to be victims’.<sup>36</sup> The JAPGW did recognise that, despite their will to enter prostitution, immoral migrants were at risk of being coerced into, and held in an exploitative form of commercial sex. Indeed, whether these women were technically, according to today’s categories, migrant sex workers, trafficked sex workers, or migrants entering sex work, the Association considered them to be ‘victims’ of an ‘immoral traffic’ simply by virtue of their movement between countries and their engagement in sex work. Its 1904 annual report acknowledged that ‘[s]ome girls go knowingly [abroad with traffickers]...But they, too, are victims. They know nothing of the misery, debasement and slavery awaiting them’.<sup>37</sup> However, the Association did not portray the immoral migrant’s potential victim status as equivalent to that of the foreign fledgling, given that the immoral migrant had, in its eyes, all but volunteered for being sexually abused and was totally vice-ridden. In its 1906 report, the JAPGW, without a word of supplementary comment let alone criticism, drew its members’ attention to a resolution made at the 1904 International Congress on the White Slave Traffic regarding the need for Congress member-states ‘hindering the recruiting in their respective countries of the foreign feminine element of evil’.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, the Association clearly viewed the immoral migrant as detrimental to, and unwanted in both Anglo-Jewish society and English society at large. The Association spared its most damning indictments of this type

<sup>36</sup> *Vigilance Record*, December 1903, p. 90; *Vigilance Record*, May 1906, p. 38; *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1904, pp. 7–8.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

<sup>38</sup> *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1906, p. 31.

of potential trafficking victim for its private discourses and advocated only one solution: repatriation. While certain of its number endorsed the state restricting the immigration of ‘vicious’ or ‘criminal’ aliens, the JAPGW saw this repatriation as its own responsibility, and state intervention as a last measure if its efforts failed. Nearly a decade before the Aliens Act, members of the Association resolved at an internal meeting, ‘[s]ome steps must be taken to prevent the constant arrivals of [foreign girls...leading immoral lives]....[T]he names and addresses of girls who come over here...who are living immoral lives should be sent to the Rabbis of their own towns and they be requested to take every step they can to prevent others from following them to England’.<sup>39</sup> Unlike certain foreign fledglings whose onwards journey to their country of origin or to a respectable address was deemed necessary but not urgent, the JAPGW resolved that the only solution for immoral migrants was for them to be immediately removed from England and sent back home.

As with the foreign fledgling, the JAPGW suggested that the immoral migrant was likely to succumb to trafficking not only because of her own flaws but because of her pedigree. However, no reference was made to her parentage. Her shortcomings were suggested to be innate and immutable. Again, here, the Association drew upon ideas that already had resonance in respectable English society—this time regarding the innate corruption and malignancy of ‘the prostitute’, and adjusted the ideas according to the meaning it gave to the immoral migrant’s status as a foreigner. While notions of the fallenness of ‘the prostitute’ had currency in Orthodox Jewish culture, the JAPGW based its representations, above all, on ideas of female sex workers that were embedded in turn-of-the-century English culture. A few JAPGW members including Constance Battersea took a more sympathetic view towards foreign Jews working as sex workers within England than the one promoted by the Association at large, and advocated the rehabilitation rather than the direct removal of these women.<sup>40</sup> The opinions of the feminist, women’s rights-oriented fringe of the Association, however, had little resonance in the group’s key anti-trafficking actions and representations. The same can be said of women’s voices.

The JAPGW did relate the flaws it considered to blight each type of woman at risk of being trafficked to the poverty and discrimination rife in her home country. At the 1910 Jewish International Conference, Chief

<sup>39</sup> Third Minute Book of the General Committee, 6 November 1896, JAPGW, HL, MS 173, 2/1/3.

<sup>40</sup> Battersea cited in JAPGW, *Jewish International Conference*, pp. 131–2.

Rabbi Hermann Adler averred in support of the Association's work: 'We cannot be surprised if ill-treatment, oppression...and consequent fear of starvation drive men and women to reprehensible means of earning a livelihood'.<sup>41</sup> Equally, at the same conference, JAPGW members considered the role of Orthodox Jewish laws and customs, particularly surrounding sex and marriage, in precipitating trafficking. However, such structural factors were portrayed as merely exacerbating the two types of potential trafficking victims' inherent shortcomings.<sup>42</sup> The Association declared regarding the foreign fledgling in its annual report the year after the conference, '[e]xtreme poverty and miserable environment on the one hand, the seductive tongue and the vision of pleasure and plenty on the other. It is easy to imagine which is likely to appeal more to a hungry, weak-minded or desperate girl'.<sup>43</sup>

One might infer that, by effectively stigmatising foreign trafficked women as various shades of immoral, undeserving aliens, the JAPGW was positioning trafficked English women as pure, non-consenting 'white slaves' who merited the nation's support and succour. This, however, was not the case. The JAPGW did not rehearse 'white slavery' rhetoric because it simply did not believe that trafficking was an Englishwoman's burden. While the association, like the NVA, would inform its members about the perils of allowing their daughters to travel abroad alone or befriend strangers, such reminders did not come with the expectation that these daughters could or would ever be in a position to succumb to traffickers. In its eyes, true Anglo-Jewish girls, and indeed true English girls, were not potential trafficking victims for they did not have the 'foreign' moral deficiencies required to occupy such a dangerous category. They were the moral antithesis of foreign female migrants. They were naturally respectable, respected themselves, and knew that their place was at home, contributing to the nation as wives and mothers. This can be seen in the fact that the Association focused almost exclusively on trafficking cases involving migrant women. It can also be seen in the Association's depiction of trafficking as a problem that English or British subjects acted against, rather than participated in. The JAPGW's 1907 annual report registered how it was 'gratifying to find that our Association is recognized, both at home and abroad, as a standing protest of British Jews against an evil which they seek to suppress'.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Chief Rabbi Adler cited in *ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>42</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 90–100.

<sup>43</sup> *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1911, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> *JAPGW Annual Report*, 1907, p. 41.



Similarly, the Association saw the nation's men, to say nothing of the nation's women, as morally incapable of organising trafficking. Montefiore proudly declared on behalf of the JAPGW that '[n]o English Jew had so far forgotten his duty to England as to be engaged in this traffic'.<sup>45</sup> Thus, while both the original proponents of 'white slavery' rhetoric and the JAPGW distinguished between trafficked women (or women at risk of being trafficked) using particular concepts of sexual innocence and complicity, the Jewish Association did not do so to separate pure and unwilling trafficking victims from impure and complicit prostitutes, as in 'white slavery' rhetoric. Rather, it mobilised its ideas of innocence and complicity to establish the level of guilt and the lack of deservingness of women at risk of being trafficked, separating bad from less bad rather than good from bad, and moral blackness from grey rather than white from black.

While this short article is concerned with representations of women deemed prone to being trafficked, it bears mentioning that the JAPGW spent relatively little time discussing 'the trafficker' in its public discourses, and what little attention Association members did focus on him (because they invariably typecast the principal accomplices in trafficking as male) was negative but not entirely damning. Although the JAPGW cast 'the trafficker' as 'the most cowardly, the meanest, and the most despicable of his kind...the enemy of the human species', it also acknowledged his prowess as an extremely accomplished businessman.<sup>46</sup> It painted him as a foreign entrepreneurial mastermind who had defected to the dark side and was therefore loathsome but whose business skills were, in isolation, superlative. At the 1910 Jewish International Conference, Arthur Moro spoke of 'the extraordinary intelligence, energy, ingenuity and enterprise now employed by the traffickers in successfully conducting their detestable trade' and confided with fellow delegates, 'I have often thought wistfully of the benefit which would accrue to our people if these qualities, so admirable in themselves, could be put to better use'.<sup>47</sup>

## Consequences

Trafficking, then, was misrepresented by one of the country's dominant authorities on the subject as a 'foreign problem' inflicted upon

<sup>45</sup> C Montefiore cited in *The Suffragette*, 11 July 1913, p. 660.

<sup>46</sup> S Singer cited in *Vigilance Record*, July 1905, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> Moro cited in JAPGW, *Jewish International Conference*, p. 31.

respectable England. It was cast as a problem that was caused first and foremost by foreign working-class women and girls who, to varying degrees, had rendered themselves prone to sexual abuse on account of their inborn moral inferiority, their primitivism, and their inappropriate behaviour. The reasoning behind this was simple, if highly prejudicial: the more agency a woman exercised outside the home, in terms of her labour and/or sexual relations, the more morally deficient she must be, and the more susceptible to, and culpable for injury sustained to her person she was—especially if she happened to be working-class and, most importantly, foreign. It is no coincidence that the JAPGW seldom referred to English girls as potential trafficking victims.

By setting out these rules, the JAPGW, in turn, forged a damaging distinction between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ foreign poor that was cut through by xenophobia, class bias, and misogyny. According to the JAPGW’s representation of trafficking, in aspiring for a better life abroad, foreign fledglings attempted to transgress the boundaries prescribed by respectable English society for their sex and class, and so needed extensive moral instruction by respectable (English) parties before they could be considered capable of remaining in the country as ‘desirable subjects’—a job that the JAPGW only on occasion deemed worth doing. In vying to sell their bodies abroad, immoral migrants consciously transgressed these boundaries, and their immorality and danger could not be remedied. They were ‘undesirable aliens’ who needed to be sent back home. By extension, women and girls who were trafficked were effectively criminalised as, at best, half-victims according to their perceived level of dependence and passivity. Migrant sex workers, the group effectively most prone to sexual abuse and coercion, received the thinnest end of the wedge as both sexually and, to a degree, financially autonomous women. (Male) traffickers and pimps, meanwhile, regardless of their class and foreignness, were implicitly partly absolved by the JAPGW as at best only half-criminals—as thoroughly evil yet exceptionally talented entrepreneurs.

‘The white slave’ that had dominated representations of trafficking in the early 1880s was thereby replaced with ‘the guilty victim’ who came in many shades from grey to black. ‘The respectable Englishman’ came out best in the Association’s discourses, being positioned as the full subject, and the full agent. He was tacitly constituted as the supreme moral arbiter with the right to define, judge, and advocate action towards the various foreign participants in trafficking. Indeed, it is not surprising that the

JAPGW had few words to say on the structural socio-economic or the religio-cultural factors that prompted the traffic in its co-religionists. To it and its ‘respectable’ English members, trafficking was no more or no less than a question of the (im)morality of poor foreign women who varied from flawed to just plain bad.

In making these observations, it is not my intention to trivialise the important structural foundations that the JAPGW laid in both the national and international fight against trafficking, or the fear that members of the Association felt on account of the seemingly rising tide of prejudice towards Jewish people in England. However, I do mean to question the way in which the Association, partly as a result of this fear, problematised trafficking and treated migrants who came to England, often fleeing grinding poverty, prejudice and violence, in search of a better life.

Within its detrimental misrepresentation of trafficking, the JAPGW also publically endorsed a number of other ideas that contradicted its commitment to the ‘protection of girls and women’. Although its annual reports and petitions were circulated mainly around its fifty-odd members and select followers (Jewish and non-Jewish) across the country, and any addresses its members made were typically to like-minded moral reform groups, what its audience lacked in size, it made up for in influence in and outside national, and often also, international anti-trafficking circles. As we have seen, the Association rehearsed and so reinforced discourses that had increasing resonance in English culture of the day regarding the danger to the social order posed by working-class women’s independence. It corroborated the notion in public debates over sex work that growing numbers of sex workers were wayward girls who had erred because of the new freedoms within their reach and the draws of modern consumerism.<sup>48</sup> Further, along with endorsing a double-standard of sexual morality, it entrenched the racialised concepts of ‘the prostitute’ as a contaminative, anti-national ‘other’ that were circulating, particularly in bourgeois circles, at the turn of the century.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> For an excellent examination of these ideas in later English representations of trafficking see J Laite, ‘Immoral Traffic: Mobility, health, labor, and the “Lorry Girl” in mid-twentieth-century Britain’, *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 52, 2013, pp. 693—721.

<sup>49</sup> Bartley, pp. 155—73.

Crucially, through its representation of trafficking, the Association, albeit unintentionally, not only reinforced but also extended the prejudice that was being disseminated by prominent anti-alienists, and thereby distinguished England's growing migrant population from respectable English society at large as perpetually mutually exclusive entities. Its portrayal of the trafficker as an immoral middleman dovetailed with Arnold White and other prominent anti-alienists' racialised scaremongering regarding 'the venal Jewish landlord or sweatshop owner', profiting from gross exploitation. Perhaps most damaging, however, was the Association's portrayal of the female recipients of its anti-trafficking efforts. Despite confining its most vehement condemnations to its private discourses, the JAPGW's portrayal of the immoral migrant as a depraved outsider who came to the country expressly to pursue her 'vocation' in prostitution, tacitly lodged a case for 'alien women' being even more blighted and dangerous than 'alien men' and reinforced the idea that England was a target for 'undesirable foreigners'. So too did its portrayal of the foreign fledgling as a morally loose girl whose presence in English society was profoundly burdensome. The Association underscored both the danger to the nation of the impoverished (im)migrant population and the 'common sense' of purging the country of not just 'criminal and vicious aliens', but all poor foreigners. In driving this wedge between migrant and respectable English subject, the JAPGW scored a dangerous own goal. The anti-alienist prejudices it rehearsed and extended formed the bedrock of the simmering Antisemitism in the country. While causing little danger among the members of the Association, the circulation of the group's discourses outside the Jewish community, which was modest yet not insignificant, risked fanning the very flames that Battersea, Moro and Montefiore wanted to extinguish. The Association knew that by acting against Jews' participating in trafficking it risked bringing negative attention to England's Jewish community as a whole, but its misrepresentation of trafficking considerably increased the odds.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

The JAPGW aspired, through its operations and its discourses, to demonstrate the lack of difference between England's Jews and respectable English society. And it achieved this, for, as has been suggested, despite its singular motivation, and its community-specific

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<sup>50</sup> Minutes of Council, 11 February 1902, JAPGW, HL, MS 173, 2/3/1.

focus, the core ideologies and prejudices it espoused were largely those espoused by its anti-trafficking ally, the NVA. The Jewish Association was, in short, a product of its time, that is, not a Jewish product *per se* but, in the context of the national fight against trafficking, a very bourgeois English one.

More broadly, the example of the JAPGW's discourses suggests that to fully understand the deeper ideological roots of contemporary representations of trafficking in the sex sector, we need to build a more comprehensive, more nuanced, and more sensitive appreciation of the ways in which the world's first anti-trafficking organisations problematised trafficking. We need to look beyond the 'myth of "white slavery"'. The project of demonstrating the link between the representations of 'the trafficked (or potentially trafficked) woman' put forward by groups such as the JAPGW and the representations mobilised by key contemporary anti-trafficking initiatives is not one that I have attempted in this short article. My intention has been to shine a brighter light on a key overlooked historical discourse of trafficking. However, I hope that this article inspires others to look for not only 'the white slave' but also 'the poor, morally-dubious female migrant', and her many brothers and sisters, in the representations that feature in today's anti-trafficking discourses.

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# Captured ‘Realities’ of Human Trafficking: Analysis of photographs illustrating stories on trafficking into the sex industry in Serbian media

*Elena Krsmanovic*

## Abstract

Past research has looked at how the media frames human trafficking, but has seldom included analysis of visual representations. To bridge this gap, this paper scrutinises stereotypical representations of persons trafficked into the sex industry in photographs published in Serbian online media from 2011 to 2014. To uncover characteristics of dominant tropes in this sample, a method of semiotic analysis is applied. The analysis argues that images are dominated by portrayals of trafficked persons that fit into one of two frames: powerless victim or unworthy prostitute. Male figures are rarely presented in these photographs, but when present, they are shown to hurt or control the women depicted alongside them. Chains, padlocks, barcodes, whip marks, and other symbols associated with slavery are present to a lesser extent. However, they testify to the tendency to link human trafficking to slavery and to use the moral potential of the anti-slavery rhetoric. Photographs are too easily seen as authentic, factual transcripts of reality. This paper suggests that these images tell us more about societal fear of insecurity, ideas about gender, erotic obsessions and morality than about human trafficking itself. It also argues that the meaning of trafficking is shaped by the deeply embedded codes of patriarchy and hidden misogyny present in Serbian society.

**Keywords:** human trafficking, trafficking into the sex industry, visual representation, media photographs, images of human trafficking, Serbia, Balkans, Eastern Europe

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## Introduction

Shortly after I submitted the first draft of this paper, one of the human trafficking experts I interviewed for my PhD research told me about a recent event in Serbia that highly jeopardised the safety of a human trafficking survivor. To obtain visual illustration for an article on users of services provided by people trafficked into the sex industry, a local press team found the trafficked person's house, waited for her to come out, and published her photograph in the most popular daily newspapers in the country. Nothing was done to protect her identity, even though she was underage and had already made an attempt to kill herself. Together with her photograph, the public was introduced to her story which included details of her age, names of people suspected of trafficking her, the name of the public figure who allegedly raped her, locations where the exploitation happened, as well as quotes from expert witness testimonies on her psychological wellbeing and intellectual capacities.<sup>1</sup> According to the expert I spoke to, and several others who later corroborated the story, information about where the victim lived was contained in court documentation that one of the legal representatives of the accused handed to the press.<sup>2</sup> The people I spoke with did not have any information to share about the consequences of those actions. The prosecution did not react, and no one was held responsible for endangering the victim or providing access to confidential documentation. Even though extreme instances such as this are rare,<sup>3</sup> visual representation of human trafficking in Serbian media is highly problematic and has grave implications on how the issue is perceived and approached both socially and politically. This paper therefore scrutinises photographs published alongside stories on trafficking into the sex industry and identifies problematic symbols that appear in these illustrations.

From a media perspective at least two major obstacles to documenting human trafficking in photographic images can be identified: (1) producing authentic and newsworthy photographs takes time and money, which is a luxury most media outlets cannot afford and (2) this task is even more difficult when trying to document clandestine criminal

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, anti-trafficking expert from Serbia, Belgrade, 03 February 2016.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> In this analysis five photographs of real victims were published.

phenomena. Consequently, it is not surprising that the great majority of illustrations in stories on human trafficking into the sex industry in online media are selected from photo agencies, archives or stock photography (searchable online databases used to obtain photos for a lower cost). It is highly important to analyse such visualisations because the selection process of these images is culturally determined and reveals preconceptions that promote certain types of understanding of trafficking.

Academics argue that media accounts of human trafficking are too often considered to be testimonials of the nature of the crime and used to identify characteristics of trafficked persons and offenders.<sup>4</sup> By ignoring the fact that not all cases reach media outlets, and those that do are not necessarily reported on, such research endeavours result in problematic generalisations. On the other hand, there are studies concerned with how media frame the issue,<sup>5</sup> but they seldom include analysis of the visual representation of human trafficking.<sup>6</sup> Such an approach to media reporting by the academic community has limited our understanding of the public perception and stereotyped media constructions related to trafficking in human beings. Another limitation comes from the fact that most studies focus on the representation of trafficking in the West,<sup>7</sup> and fail to consider possible differences in how trafficking is framed in other regions.

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<sup>4</sup> For example see Y Leechaianan and M P Roth, 'Cases of Human Trafficking in Texas during 1992 to 2006: A content analysis', *Journal of Criminal Justice Research*, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 1—23, and E Dugan, 'Forced Labour and Human Trafficking: Media coverage in 2012', retrieved 14 April 2014, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/forced-labour-media-coverage-full.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> G J Gulati, 'News Frames and Story Triggers in the Media Coverage of Human Trafficking', *Human Rights Review*, vol. 12, issue 3, 2010, pp. 363—79; M Pajnik, 'Media Framing of Trafficking', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 12, issue 1, 2010, pp. 45—64; M R Sobel, 'Chronicle a Crisis: Media framing of human trafficking in India, Thailand, and the USA', *Asian Journal of Communication*, vol. 24, issue 4, 2014, pp. 315—332.

<sup>6</sup> B L Virkus, 'Human Trafficking and the Media: Comparing newspapers' portrayal of victims and offenders', Electronic Theses and Dissertations, Paper 78, University of Northern Iowa, 2014; J Ham and F Dewar, 'Shifting Public Anti-Trafficking Discourses through Arts and Media' in S Yea (ed.) *Human Trafficking in Asia: Forcing issues*, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> G J Gulati, 2010; Y Leechaianan and M P Roth, 2014; J Albanese, J S Donnelly, and T Kelegian, 'Cases of Human Trafficking in the United States: A content analysis of a calendar year in 18 cities', *International Journal of Comparative Criminology*, vol. 4, 2004, pp. 96—111; A Johnston, B Friedman and A Shafer, 'Framing the Problem of Sex Trafficking', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 14, issue 3, 2014, pp. 419—36.



As far as studies on this topic in Serbia are concerned, few attempts have been made to analyse the content of media reports, including one brief comparative study of the language used to refer to trafficked persons and traffickers by media and policy makers, and a content analysis of media articles from 2008.<sup>8</sup> Key findings of this content analysis indicate that there is a general disinterest in the topic, reports are sensationalised, and stories are usually based on information fed to the media, whereas investigative and analytical pieces are extremely rare.<sup>9</sup>

Serbia is a small country of little over seven million inhabitants lying in the heart of the 'infamous' Balkans route.<sup>10</sup> As such the country became an important transit and destination country for human trafficking in the late 1980s. People from the former Soviet republics passed through Belgrade and other migration hubs of what was then the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) on their way to the more developed Western European countries. Others were trafficked between the Near East and Western Europe via territories of Kosovo.<sup>11</sup> For some, exploitation began in the SFRY, which had a higher economic standard and, therefore, offered lucrative opportunities to traffickers operating in the region.<sup>12</sup> In the nineties, however, the country was first torn apart by war, and then further weakened by poor economic management. Poverty and unemployment consequently grew, and Serbia became a country of origin too.<sup>13</sup> After Milosevic's fall, democratic reforms did not prove long lasting. Serbia signed and ratified relevant international conventions and protocols in the early 2000s,<sup>14</sup> and introduced the Crime Act of Trafficking

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<sup>8</sup> S Savic 'Terminologija Vezana Za Trgovinu Ženama', in I Radović (ed.), *Trgovina ljudima—Priručnik za novinare*, ASTRA, Beograd, 2009, pp. 137—42 and S Dekić et al., 'Sex Slavery and Politics: Representations of trafficked women in the Serbian media', *Canadian Women's Studies=Les Cahiers de la Femme*, vol. 22, no. 3, June, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> I Radovic (ed.), 2009, p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> S Ćopić, 'Putevi Trgovine ljudima u Evropi i Pozicija Srbije na Njima', *Temida*, vol. 11, issue 4, 2008, p. 56; IOM, *Chan-ging Patterns and Trends of Traf-fic-king in Per-sons in the Bal-kan Re-gion*, Geneva, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> S Ćopić, p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> V Nikolić-Ristanović, 'Trgovina ljudima u Srbiji i Okolnim Zemljama: Obim, karakteristike i uzroci', *Temida*, vol. 5, issue 1, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Among others, UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children (2000) and Council of Europe's Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005).

in Human Beings under Article 388 of National Criminal Code in 2003.<sup>15</sup> Visa liberalisation with the European Union (EU) in November 2009 largely facilitated the movement of people from Serbia to other EU countries.<sup>16</sup> To make this change possible, Serbia had to demonstrate strong political will to fight cross-border crime, including trafficking in persons. After visa liberalisation was achieved, political will to tackle the issue subsided.

Since the breakdown of SFRY, Serbian women have faced discrimination in the labour market and limited opportunities to migrate legally and independently, which resulted in large-scale irregular migration. At the same time, increasingly restrictive immigration policies were imposed in destination countries, contributing to higher risks of human trafficking.<sup>17</sup> High unemployment<sup>18</sup> and poverty<sup>19</sup> rates in the country continue to function as push factors. In such conditions, stricter migration control is not likely to result in preventing exploitation, but rather forcing migrants to place greater reliance on potentially deceptive agencies and middlemen.<sup>20</sup> Under such conditions, a reliable media picture of human trafficking and related risks could contribute to success in prevention of the crime and protection of trafficked persons. Another reason to critically examine visual representation of human trafficking in Serbia is that the country offers an ideal case study of the racialised hierarchies that are implicit in the trafficking representation regime, which will be analysed further below.

<sup>15</sup> Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia, Official Gazette of RS, no. 72/09

<sup>16</sup> Citizens of Serbia are allowed to travel within the Schengen zone without a visa, but they do not have the right to stay more than three months or work. To enter the territory of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, citizens of Serbia need to obtain a visa.

<sup>17</sup> M Wijers and L Lap-Chew, *Trafficking in Women Forced Labour and Slavery-like Practices in Marriage, Domestic Labour and Prostitution*, Foundation Against Trafficking in Women, Utrecht, 1999; GAATW, *Beyond Borders: Exploring links between trafficking and migration*, GAATW, Bangkok, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia report shows 45% unemployment rate among the young population in the last quarter of 2015. Rates are also high for the general working population (ages 15-64), ranging from 17% to 25.5% in the period between 2008 and 2015. Some economic experts and analysts in the country have raised questions of authenticity of this data, labelling official reports as optimistic (see G V, 'Sumnja u Zvaničnu Statistiku', *Danas*, 5 August 2015, retrieved 27 May 2016, [http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/ekonomija/sumnja\\_u\\_zvanicnu\\_statistiku.4.html?news\\_id=305951](http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/ekonomija/sumnja_u_zvanicnu_statistiku.4.html?news_id=305951)).

<sup>19</sup> B Mijatovic, 'Siromaštvo u Srbiji u 2014 Godini', *Tim za socijalno uključivanje i smanjenje siromaštva*, Vlada Republike Srbije.

<sup>20</sup> M Wijers and L Lap-Chew, 1999, p. 55. See also case study: C Parizot, 'Tightening Closure, Securing Disorder: Israeli closure policies and informal border economy during the second Intifada (2000-2006)', *RefugeeWatch*, 2008, pp. 54-74.

## Methodology

The photographs analysed here were published alongside articles on trafficking into the sex industry in Serbian online media in the period between 2011 and 2014. The decision not to include texts pertaining to other forms of human trafficking was made because the smaller scope allows for a more in-depth analysis, and provides insight into the moralistic judgements typically embedded in the media discourse on trafficking into the sex industry. Articles were collected through Google News Archive (GNA), which allowed a comprehensive search of Serbian online media and hence gave access to all images anyone with internet access could have encountered in trafficking news stories during this period. This search method also helped avoid poorly maintained archives and tags that impede direct search on some Serbian news websites. GNA was searched for the following terms: human trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, trafficking in women, and white slavery. The search was extended to include all these terms because journalists writing in Serbian frequently use these phrases as synonyms for human trafficking. The term ‘white slavery’ has specific historical meaning rooted in a cultural myth of white girls being tricked and sold into prostitution by foreign men.<sup>21</sup> Despite numerous attempts by the government and civil society to educate journalists on the use of more appropriate language, the term has been appropriated by the local press to label trafficking in women and remains in use.

Articles that focus on other forms of human trafficking (e.g. trafficking for exploitation in other sectors, forced criminality, etc.) were excluded from the sample. Texts that mention trafficking into the sex industry but focus on some other issue, e.g. irregular migration, were also disregarded. The search resulted in 217 relevant texts on trafficking into the sex industry, but pieces that did not contain photographic illustration were eliminated from the sample. Finally, images from collected articles were coded in NVivo based on what they represent (victims, objects, places, experts interviewed, traffickers). This analysis focused only on the most prevalent motif—images that represent trafficked persons (alone or with others). Thus, a total of 123 photographs originating from 108 sources (media texts) were analysed for this paper. Media in which these

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<sup>21</sup> For critique see: J. Doezeema, ‘Loose Women or Lost Women? The re-emergence of the myth of “white slavery” in contemporary discourses on trafficking in women’, *Gender Issues*, vol. 18, issue 1, 2000, pp. 23—50.

photographs were published include Večernje novosti, Alo!, Blic, B92.net, Press, Vesti Online, RSE, and others.<sup>22</sup>

Semiotic analysis was chosen as a suitable method of inspection of news photographs because it has proved useful for researching different phenomena of mass and popular culture.<sup>23</sup> The approach to semiotic analysis in this paper is based on Chandlers' suggestion that a text analysed (in this case a photograph) is a complex semiotic sign that contains other signs.<sup>24</sup> A strong semiotic analysis explores the relations between denotative and connotative meanings of signs and hegemonic ideologies.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, this analysis scrutinises re-occurring signs and their links to the patriarchal code that dominates Serbian culture and media.<sup>26</sup> Semiotic analysis was first applied to identify and examine dominant ways of representing people trafficked into the sex industry, with a photograph as a unit of analysis. Two major categories—those of the powerless victim and the unworthy prostitute—emanate from concepts of innocent victims and 'fallen women' present in the critical human trafficking literature.<sup>27</sup> These concepts were borne out as dominant in the media's selection of photographs. The third category, however, emerged inductively, as a significant number of photographs showed trafficked persons represented as slaves. The three categories are scrutinised below.

## Powerless Victim

In portraying trafficked persons there were two seemingly opposing representations—one that strips women of their agency and shows their

<sup>22</sup> The category 'Other' was used for media that had only one or two relevant texts in the analysed period. These include online platforms of daily newspapers such as Politika and 24 Sata and online news media such as Mondo, E Novine, Telegraf, and Srbija Danas.

<sup>23</sup> J Vasiljević, 'Semiološka Analiza Reklame: Metodološka razmatranja', *Etno-antropološki Problemi*, vol. 2, issue 1, 2007, pp. 41–54.

<sup>24</sup> D Chandler, *Semiotics for Beginners*, Aberystwyth University, 1994.

<sup>25</sup> S Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in S Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*, Sage, London, 1997, pp. 13–74; J Schroeder, *Visual Consumption*, Routledge, London, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> S Milivojević, 'Žene i Mediji—Strategije isključivanja', *Časopis za feminističku teoriju Genero, specijalno izdanje*, Beograd, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> J Doezeema, pp. 28–30; H R Hallgrimsdottir, R Phillips, and C Enoi, 'Fallen Women and Rescued Girls: Social stigma and media narratives of the sex industry in Victoria, B.C., from 1980 to 2005', *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie*, vol. 43, issue 3, 2006, pp. 265–280.

desperation and hopelessness, and one that is based on eroticisation of the female body. This binary opposition is not new to scholars interested in human trafficking,<sup>28</sup> and as Snajdr explains, it discourages deeper analysis and more nuanced understandings of the complexity of human trafficking.<sup>29</sup> When shown as victims, women are either portrayed alone, which accentuates their dead-end position of despair, or as facing a violent attack from a male figure. In the first case, what comes to attention is their body posture. Victims in the photographs are almost always seated in an indoor confined location (only 3 of 27 women are shown standing, none of them outside). This suggests their movement is restricted to gloomy bedrooms or dungeon-like empty rooms that constitute their surroundings in the analysed images. Shadows and dark or unsaturated, cold colours match the miserable world trafficked persons are portrayed as being stuck in. In several photographs ropes around their wrists and tapes on their mouths remove any suspicion that they may be free to leave. Not only seated, many of these women are assuming a foetal position, which further highlights their powerlessness. Body language studies have shown that the foetal position is a typical response to fear. By taking this position, people are turning away from the danger and protecting the ventral area of the body, thus making themselves appear smaller and harder to spot.<sup>30</sup> Seeing people curled up like little children evokes feelings of empathy and a wish to offer support. Thus, these representations draw a clear distinction between the viewer in power, who is positioned as the one called to help, and the portrayed women devoid of all agency. This hierarchical vision of agency between the viewer and the depicted was also problematised by Hua and Ray in their analysis of the UN awareness raising video *Cleaning Lady*, in which a white woman employed as a cleaner helps women of colour to get out of the sexual exploitation ring.<sup>31</sup>

The analysed images rarely show women who are looking back at the camera. As a rule, trafficked persons are looking away or covering their crying faces with their palms. By displaying shame and desperation,

<sup>28</sup> R Andrijasevic, 'Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns', *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, 2007, pp. 4—44.

<sup>29</sup> E Snajdr, 'Beneath the Master Narrative: Human trafficking, myths of sexual slavery and ethnographic realities', *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2013, pp. 238—239.

<sup>30</sup> M H Ford, *Body Language and Behavioral Profiling*, Authorhouse, Bloomington, 2010, p. 95.

<sup>31</sup> J Hua and K Ray, 'Practice of Humanity', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 10, issue 3, 2010, p. 255.

portrayed figures plead their innocence to an audience that is framed implicitly as morally judgemental. In addition, looking back is a form of interaction between subjects and it is unimaginable for ‘them’, the trafficked persons, to be able to directly communicate with us, the free. I will argue that visual representations of trafficking in Serbian media serve the function of distancing readers from the horrors of the crime. The horror element might be further invalidated through the eroticisation of women’s suffering. Namely, in many of the images that fit into the powerless victim trope, depicted women are dressed provocatively or posed in such a way that their legs are elongated and dominate the frame. Contemporary depictions of suffering, therefore, meet the commercial expectations of attractiveness. These photographs show a bizarre symbiosis of suffering and beauty, offering a dose of pleasure for those looking at the image of others in distress. By accentuating newsworthy elements of violence and sex, these images have a significant titillating potential. More problematically, representations of beautified misery and their frequent repetition can enforce an idea of a natural connection between femininity, sex, and desperation, and neutralise the viewer’s reactions to it. Visual representation of harm raises important ethical questions concerning the spectator’s relationship to the person who is being victimised. By turning another’s suffering into a spectacle, and then recycling that same imagery over and over again, the media may be nullifying the shock effect and with it our feelings of empathy. Susan Sontag argued that images of suffering do not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. Rather, such images anaesthetise us and corrupt these abilities.<sup>32</sup> What this sample seems to be indicative of is the perverse desire to violate one’s own sense of security, and to then regain the feeling of being privileged and safe—be it because we are not naïve enough to engage with suspicious criminal-looking men like those masculine giants portrayed next to persons who have been trafficked, or because we conform to gender norms defined in our society. Thus, trafficked persons are easily presumed to be different from us, and even deserving of their doomed fates. This interpretation builds upon the stereotype of the naïve victim that is deeply ingrained in Serbian society,<sup>33</sup> and is illustrative of the tendency to question the integrity of

<sup>32</sup> S Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin, New York, 1977, p. 15

<sup>33</sup> Medium Gallup, ‘Istraživanje Javnog Mnjenja o Problemu Trgovine Ljudima’, in I Radović (ed.), *Trgovina Ljudima—Priručnik za novinare*, ASTRA, Belgrade, 2009, pp. 49–72.

victims of violence, explored by American psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman.<sup>34</sup> Similar propensity to re-establish the feeling of one's own security is echoed in the language of the articles that boldly proclaim 'anybody can become a victim' and then list sets of extremely negative socio-economic circumstances affecting people in known cases of trafficking. In her analysis of modern and historical anti-slavery discourses, Brace too concludes that the current social order presupposes that only some of us can be secure and that the process of exclusion from citizenship serves to preserve the binary between ourselves as human subjects, and slaves that are reduced to disposable bodies.<sup>35</sup>

When represented in a situation where they are attacked by a male figure, helplessness remains the prevailing motif in portrayals of the powerless victims. We see them held in the firm grip of men's muscular arms. We see clenched fists and belts in the hands of their traffickers that are ready



Image 1. Večernje novosti. Title translation: HORROR IN ZAGREB! Underage daughter sold! He locked her in his house and raped her!

<sup>34</sup> J. L. Herman, *Trauma i Pporavak – Struktura traumatskog doživljaja*, Psihopolis Institut, Novi Sad, 2012, p. 383

<sup>35</sup> L. Brace, 'Bodies in Abolition: Broken hearts and open wounds', *Citizenship Studies*, 2014, vol. 18, issue 5, p. 496.

to inflict pain. And we see scared women, some of whom are trying to protect themselves by covering their head and bowing down, while others are looking back with eyes wide open and make-up smeared by their tears. Their assailants are large, strong, and white men, carefully placed closer to the camera to appear even bigger than the women under attack. Even though this analysis focused on representation of trafficked persons, it is important to mention that illustrations of trafficking stories in Serbian media do not show criminals being brought to justice. Therefore, while readers are scared by the image of an omnipotent, untouchable, brutal trafficker, the fact that the state has failed in protecting its citizens from criminals is obscured. The pattern by which the inefficacy of the State is hidden behind a powerful enemy (e.g. the West, the ethnic other) is well recorded in Serbian political history and is manifested in the visual narrative of human trafficking as well.

Trafficked persons are rarely depicted as minors in photographs even though in the majority of cases described in the analysed articles exploited people are in fact underage. This absence of images of minors is striking and goes against the news value placed on stories on children suffering.<sup>36</sup> This can be seen as a manifestation of a taboo—an unimaginable atrocity that pertains to children forced into prostitution. Concerning the race, only two depicted persons have darker skin, one of whom features alongside a story about trafficking in India. The face of a trafficked person is therefore predominantly the face of a young white woman. The almost exclusive portrayal of white people can perhaps be explained by the relatively homogeneous demographics of Serbia.<sup>37</sup> However, Roma women are represented in neither photographs nor stories featured in Serbian press in the analysed period despite indications that Roma women are exposed to greater risks of trafficking due to higher rates of poverty, discrimination, economic dependence and unemployment.<sup>38</sup> It is important to raise the question of whether Roma women are not likely to be represented as trafficked persons because of their ethnicity, and if so, why, or whether there are other reasons why these cases are not reported on. Although studying ethnicity in relation to human trafficking is ethically challenging and much caution is needed to avoid stigmatisation

<sup>36</sup> Y Jewkes, *Media and Crime*, Sage, London, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> According to Serbian census from 2011, only Roma people, i.e. 2% of the population, are not white. The percentage is probably somewhat higher due to 4% of people whose ethnicity is unknown, undeclared or classified as 'other'.

<sup>38</sup> ODIHR, *Awareness Raising for Roma Activists on the Issue of Trafficking in Human Beings in South-Eastern Europe*, Warsaw, April 2006. Also, high numbers of Roma victims are reported in S Milivojevic et al, *Trafficking in People in Serbia*, OSCE, 2004, p. 55.



and moral entrepreneurship, this knowledge is necessary for an adequate understanding of the phenomenon.<sup>39</sup>

In her research, Jovanović shows that policy makers in Serbia tend to treat the issue of Roma trafficking and its prevention as a separate issue to the trafficking of other citizens of Serbia.<sup>40</sup> She also points out that she had to exclude sexual exploitation and focus on forced begging and forced marriages in her research, due to the fact that policy makers she spoke to referred to human trafficking of Roma exclusively in terms of these two forms of exploitation.<sup>41</sup> This is surprising when one takes into account research findings that show a high percentage of women of Roma ethnicity among sex workers.<sup>42</sup> In this respect it would be interesting to see which ethnicity dominates imagery of forced begging and forced marriage stories in Serbian press. The frequent use of the term *white slavery*, which is used by local journalists to refer to women trafficked into prostitution can be seen as providing further grounds for such an investigation and as supporting Jovanović's hypothesis that the anti-trafficking system in Serbia is highly selective and racist in choosing which cases of trafficking to problematise. As current representations tend to focus on white women, the system is more likely to develop biased responses that will not adequately protect non-white women and men who experience exploitation.

While the images of powerless victims examined here indeed carry symbols that could evoke empathy and maybe even provoke the viewer to react, what seems more likely is that they will strengthen cultural attitudes about behaviours women should not display if they wish to stay safe (e.g. migrate, accept lucrative job offers, work in the sex industry). Previous studies on discourses and approaches addressing trafficking in Western countries have put forward two arguments that were confirmed in this analysis as well. The first signalled that anti-trafficking discourse

<sup>39</sup> D Siegel, 'Ethnicity, Crime and Sex Work: A triple taboo', in D Siegel and R de Wildt, *Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking*, Springer, London, 2016, pp. 71—83.

<sup>40</sup> J Jovanović, "'Vulnerability of Roma" and Anti-Human Trafficking Policies in Serbia: Recommendations to the national policy network', CEU Center for Policy Studies, retrieved 7 March 2016, <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/default/files/publications/cps-policy-brief-osi-ttf-vulnerability-of-roma-2015.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Interview, academics/researchers, Serbia, 11 February 2016.

<sup>42</sup> G Stojaković, 'Unutar Oglašene Ravnopravnosti Polova: Istraživanje o prostituciji u Novom Sadu (2010-2012)' in J Zlatković (ed.), *Prostitucija u Srbiji—jedno od mogućih lica*, S.T.R.I.K.E, Novi Sad, 2013, pp. 24—107.

calls for the control of women.<sup>43</sup> Doezeema, for example, concludes that: ‘the myth of *white slavery/trafficking in women* is ostensibly about protecting women, yet the underlying moral concerns are with controlling them’.<sup>44</sup> The second argument suggests that the representation of trafficking and responses to it are in fact attempts to preserve neoliberal divisions between those who are privileged and those who are not, hidden under the veil of benevolent crusades waged by white saviours.<sup>45</sup>

## Unworthy Prostitute

From the media perspective, depicting provocatively dressed women is newsworthy, and so are crimes involving sexual violence.<sup>46</sup> The observation that human trafficking visualisations often come down to eroticised spectacles of female bodies is not new.<sup>47</sup> This frame was the second most commonly used in the Serbian online media in the analysed period. There were twenty-five photographs depicting highly sexualised female bodies in bars and brothel-like environments and another thirty images that show underdressed women waiting on a street corner or approaching cars to solicit customers on the streets. What we see in these photographs is a particular kind of femininity, one that is highly sexualised and therefore deviates from what is perceived to be appropriate. However, there is a fine difference between the sexualised image of a woman that fits the victim trope and the sexualised representation belonging to the unworthy prostitute trope. Victims are shown as beauties that suffer greatly, whereas prostitutes seduce and titillate, which does not indicate suffering, coercion or exploitation. The frequent use of such images alongside news reports on trafficking creates the impression that this kind of tainted femininity is at risk of being victimised by men. Furthermore, one can argue that violence suffered by women doing sex work is normalised through repetition and exclusivity of gender-stereotype portrayals—men as inherently violent, and ‘loose women’ as their natural victims. This is possible because stereotypes of female inferiority and subordination to men have been long cultivated and fostered in the Serbian media.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> J Doezeema, pp. 23—50; L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>45</sup> K Kempadoo, ‘The Modern-Day White (Wo)Man’s Burden: Trends in anti-trafficking and anti-slavery campaigns’, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2015, pp. 8—20; L B Reinares, *Sex Trafficking in Postcolonial Literature—Transnational narratives from Joyce to Bolaño*, Routledge, London, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Y Jewkes, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> R Andrijasevic, 2007, p. 39.

<sup>48</sup> S Milivojević, 2004.

## CG: Od seksa i budžet puniji

B. RADOŠAVIĆ | 06. septembar 2014. 14:31 | Komentar: 21

I u Crnoj Gori se vode javne polemike treba li ili ne legalizovati prostituciju. U „Sigurnoj ženskoj kući“ smatraju da bi korist imali samo svodnici



Image 2. Večernje novosti. Title translation: Montenegro: Filling the budget from sex

In pictures showing women in bars and private rooms, they are posed in such a way that the viewer is left with the impression that he/she is the one being led to bed by the woman, or the one to whom she is showing her seductive lingerie. Morally charged captions like ‘prostitute’ are placed under some of the photographs. This makes it easier for the reader to reduce the woman depicted to the negatively charged stereotype of the unworthy prostitute, blame her and distance her/himself from her experience and suffering described in the text. Scrutinising photographs of sex workers, author of the Whoretography blog writes: ‘all of the stereotyping is a kind of blindfold that enables many to ignore the fact that sex workers are first and foremost people, individual human beings like everyone else’.<sup>49</sup> What was once very much part of the trafficking narrative—the idea that it happens to naïve and ‘loose’ girls—is slowly being pushed out of the textual component of the articles, but survives in photographs, resurrecting an old biblical myth of the fallen woman. As Eve took the apple, her greedy, naïve daughters portrayed in

<sup>49</sup> Elusive Abstractions, retrieved 22 July 2016, <http://www.whoretography.com/new-blog/>

trafficking stories keep accepting lucrative and unrealistic job offers, and their exploitation comes as a logical consequence of not assuming gender-appropriate roles that keep women safe. Interestingly, when represented as prostitutes rather than trafficked persons, women are either photographed from behind or in such a way that one cannot see their faces. Traffickers are similarly represented in images in which they are hurting the women. The implicit message seems to be that when something ‘wrong’ is being done, Stock guarantees anonymity.

Whereas black and gloomy colours dominate victimisation frames, colours in images representing unworthy prostitutes are saturated and warm tones. Red, traditionally associated with sin, fire, blood and bodily pleasures in Judaeo-Christian cultures, dominates these images, with shades of yellow and orange variations complementing the red tones in some depictions.

Lack of political will to tackle human trafficking in Serbia creates a climate in which it is normal to represent trafficking as a trivial issue.<sup>50</sup> Visual symbols in trafficking stories signal that trafficking either happens to immoral women who deserve it or to naïve victims who suffer such an outrageous violence from such omnipotent criminals that very little can be done about it. Conflicting representations of trafficked persons send a confusing message that trafficking is horrid, but at the same time not enough of a reason to make a concerted effort to address it. This is due to the fact that in the ‘unworthy prostitute’ scenario trafficked persons are seen as possibly deserving of and responsible for the situation they are in—an attitude confirmed in a 2009 nation-wide poll, where 52% of the Serbian population indicated they think that trafficked persons are to be blamed or they are not sure about trafficked persons’ culpability.<sup>51</sup> Negative attitudes towards persons who have been trafficked were recognised in other research projects in Serbia as well, including Savic’s study on the language used in the media to refer to trafficked persons.<sup>52</sup> The belief that exploited women are suffering consequences of their own bad behaviour is widely spread in Serbia and arises from still dominant patriarchal codes accompanied by misogyny and xenophobia.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> In the interviews I did for PhD research both anti-trafficking actors providing information to the media and journalists reporting on human trafficking in Serbia asserted that this topic is not interesting to the press in the country.

<sup>51</sup> Medium Gallup, 2009, pp. 63–4.

<sup>52</sup> S Savic, 2009, p. 141.

<sup>53</sup> M Anđelkovic et al., *Human Trafficking in Serbia—Report for the Period 2000-2010*, ASTRA, Belgrade, 2011.

The fact that images of unworthy prostitutes are so frequently used in Serbian media to illustrate stories of trafficking into the sex industry is incongruent with scholarly knowledge on trafficking discourse. For example, Snajdr writes that persons who have been trafficked are typically represented as helpless and unsuspecting in the master narrative of human trafficking. He explains that deviations from the ideal innocent victim might depend on the culture, but are rarely present in the trafficking discourse.<sup>54</sup> Such significant incongruity of the visual symbols analysed here calls for further questioning of the perception of women coerced into sex work in Serbian society and challenging deeply rooted patriarchal constructions that cling so firmly to the idea of ‘fallen women’ and the right to objectify, consume and discard their bodies. The following section turns to examine how oppression of women is further achieved through symbols of slavery, and what other socio-political concerns arise from such aesthetics.

## Slave

The term ‘white slavery’ is often used in the media to refer to trafficking of women for prostitution, and trafficked persons are frequently labelled as ‘white slaves’. In addition, images illustrating stories on trafficking into the sex industry in Serbian media in the analysed period are almost exclusive in presenting trafficked persons as white women. For this reason, this section investigates historical concerns over the ‘white slavery’ phenomenon in Serbia, and then turns to analyse symbols of slavery used in the studied photographs. Turning to national folklore in search of similar themes offers an explanation of why this trope is so deeply embedded in Serbian culture. The term ‘white slavery’ was possibly first mentioned in Serbia in the book under the same title, written by Miljković in 1901, who emphasised the dangers of this new phenomenon including the threat of venereal diseases.<sup>55</sup> Yet, the fear of foreign men taking young innocent girls and ‘spoiling’ their virginity can be traced back to the times of Ottoman occupation, a period often referred to in Serbian language as *Slavery under Turks*. Such depictions are frequent in Serbian folk poetry and tales, which are still widely known and are part of

<sup>54</sup> E. Snajdr, p. 238.

<sup>55</sup> M. Miljković, *Belo Roblje (sociološko-kriminalna rasprava)*, Državna Štamparija, Beograd, 1901, as described in D. Radulović, *Prostitucija u Jugoslaviji*, Filip Višnjić, Beograd, 1986, p. 21.

mandatory readings in primary and secondary schools in the country. It is difficult to track the exact time in which these pieces were created, but some of them portray people and events from the 14<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. the song *Banović Strahinja*<sup>56</sup> about a hero whose wife was abducted by a Turk, or the songs *Bolani Dojčin*<sup>57</sup> and *Marko Kraljević Ukida Svadbarinu*<sup>58</sup> in which the culprits are black Arabs who demand one Serbian virgin girl per night from the conquered people). Thus, the fear of Serbian women being taken away by the evil foreigner is deeply rooted in the national consciousness of Serbs, and this might be the reason why images of white women are predominantly selected to illustrate stories of sexual exploitation. What is more, such folklore is very closely linked with the notion of national honour that has to be restored by a male hero who saves the girl from the foreign villain. Some of these women would rather die than accept sharing a bed with the foreign occupier, whereas others willingly ‘betray’ their husbands. This reinforces the idea that women are weak, inclined to sin and in need of a male guardian who will protect both them and the national honour.

With the rise of modern slavery discourse in anti-trafficking circles, trafficking has been increasingly equated with the contemporary version of the slave trade throughout the world. Visual representations of human trafficking abound with signs associated with slavery. Trodd identifies models of trafficking representation that arise from the historical memory of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century antislavery visual culture.<sup>59</sup> In the analysed sample of photographs, symbols of slavery are recognisable as well: filthy surroundings, chains, shackles and padlocks, whip marks, wounds and bruises, and, inevitably signs that mark people as goods—barcodes, price tags, and a variety of packaging. Some of the people represented in slavery aesthetics are depicted tied up in ropes, with their wrists, eyes, mouths or whole bodies immobilised. A number of them are wearing ragged clothes, and others are marked with barcodes or jailed behind cage bars. Because slaves are understood to have been reduced to non-agential objects, portraying trafficked persons as slaves strips them of their agency and hence removes responsibility for being in a situation

<sup>56</sup> D Lakićević (ed.), *Srpske Narodne Epske Pesme*, Bookland, Beograd, 2006, pp. 61—82.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 131—139.

<sup>58</sup> D Mitrović and S Jovanović (eds.), *Srpske Narodne Epske Pesme i Balade*, Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, Beograd, 2001, pp. 134—141.

<sup>59</sup> Z Trodd, ‘Am I Still Not a Man and a Brother? Protest memory in contemporary antislavery visual culture’, *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 34, issue 2, 2013, pp. 338—52



Image 3. Večernje novosti. Title translation: State Department: Serbians—victims of forced labour

in which they must sell sex. In addition, these images use the moral potential of anti-slavery endeavours, which may be interpreted as an attempt to provoke empathic reactions. However, they can also be read as directing the debate back to moral questions of right and wrong.<sup>60</sup> As a result, any response not urging a grand rescue mission is deemed immoral, as is any argument that sex work is a legitimate source of income. By sticking to the binaries of victim and perpetrator, enslaved and free, people and goods, good and evil, nuances between different cases of human trafficking are blurred. Such oversimplification in representing trafficking into the sex industry is particularly dangerous because it may promote inadequate responses to the criminal act, limit support and assistance to trafficked persons who do not fit the stereotype of a helpless white girl, and adversely affect the rights of sex workers and migrant women.

<sup>60</sup> J. Berman, '(Un)Popular Strangers and Crises (Un)Bounded: Discourses of sex-trafficking, the European political community and the panicked state of the modern state', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2003, pp. 37—86.

Apart from visual signs reminiscent of the historical trans-Atlantic slave trade, there are images characterised by different kinds of slavery aesthetics that transcend into the world of sadistic fetishes and ‘sex slaves’. Namely, taken to the extreme in several images, a sexualised female body is represented as a toy, a depersonalised object of lust to be used in any way desired. In one of the photographs, for example, we see a woman wearing high heels, lingerie and fishnet stockings. She is on her knees and the front of her body is bent over a low table. Her head and the upper part of her body are not included in the photo frame. In this way, she is depersonalised and her pelvic region is pronounced as the only relevant part for the illustration. On the edge of the table one can spot different sadomasochistic props—whips, floggers, and ropes. Another photograph shows a woman standing in a latex skirt, with various undergarments hung on the wall behind her. With her head out of the frame, she is also depersonalised, but we do see her breasts and lower body, with her hands folded behind her back in a typical submissive pose.

## Devojke kao robovi

J. ILIĆ | 07. februar 2013. 16:48 > 20:12 | Komentara: 9

**Krivične prijave protiv 13 osoba zbog trgovine ljudima. Plaćali za seks, iako su znali da su maloletnice**



Ilustracija

Image 4. Večernje novosti. Title translation: Girls are slaves

Building upon Freud's concept of deriving sexual pleasure from looking, Hall claims that cultural representations of the taboo objects of forbidden desires provide the observers with an alibi and allow them to



keep looking while disavowing the sexual nature of that gaze.<sup>61</sup> This argument supports the claim made in this paper, that images of trafficked persons have titillating potential that is often abused by media outlets. Slavery aesthetics bring forward a dehumanising way of representation of trafficked persons. As Trodd concludes in her analysis, adaptations of the abolitionist iconography in current trafficking representations have reinforced paternalism, dehumanisation, depersonalisation, and sensationalism, leading to a visual culture that ‘heroises the abolitionist liberator, minimalizes slave agency, pornifies violence and indulges in voyeurism’.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

Like all other stereotypes, those related to human trafficking should be considered in their historical context and as subject to power relations. Their role is to make sense of the world and reduce our anxiety over the intangible and unimaginable.<sup>63</sup> As Lippmann, who coined the term, stresses ‘stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defences we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy’.<sup>64</sup> Andrijasevic has already shown the relevance of these considerations in terms of narratives and images representing victims of trafficking into the sex industry in Europe.<sup>65</sup> The analysis in this paper extends to consider visual stereotypical representations of victims of human trafficking into the sex industry in Serbian online media. Paying attention to what mediated photographs are saying about human trafficking is of great importance because the media have a significant role to play in preventing the crime, mobilising public support for action against it, and shaping the environment in which trafficked persons are able to exercise their rights and recover. Furthermore, in order to represent the risks of exploitation in a credible way, stereotypes need to

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<sup>61</sup> S Hall, ‘The Spectacle of the “Other”’, in S Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*, Sage, London, 1997, p. 268

<sup>62</sup> Z Trodd, p. 339.

<sup>63</sup> R Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on representations*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> W Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, Macmillan, New York, 1956, p. 96, quoted in R Dyer, 1993.

<sup>65</sup> R Andrijasevic, ‘The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation’, in M Evans (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Sage, London, 2015, pp. 359—373.

be deconstructed, and moral panics replaced by realistic depictions of the trafficking phenomenon.

Photographs are too easily seen as transparent, unmediated, mechanical transcripts of reality. The analysis of victims' representation suggests that these images tell us more about societal fears regarding security, ideas about gender, erotic obsessions and morality than about the phenomenon of human trafficking itself. Two competing depictions stood out from the analysis—one that shows powerless victims and the other showing the objectified unworthy prostitutes. The analysed trafficking representations signal that issues of oppression and objectification of women, normalisation of violence against them, and societal indifference towards brutality and exploitation are present in Serbian culture. It is from the deeply embedded codes of patriarchy and hidden misogyny that the meaning of trafficking is being produced. Such a matrix of understanding promotes the idea that women who sell sex are trading in their pride, dignity, and humanity too. To prove she is still a human worthy of our attention, the victim needs to be shown as coerced, subjected to brutal violence and control. In other words, reduced to a slave without agency, a child-like creature stuck in a helpless situation. This analysis suggests that the conflicting representations of powerless victims and unworthy prostitutes obscure the complexity of the trafficking phenomenon. Furthermore, frequent repetition of the unworthy prostitute trope seems to be both symptom and cause of negative attitudes towards women trafficked in the sex industry. Spreading the belief that women who end up in trafficking situations are to be blamed for what happened to them can further justify Serbia's insufficient efforts and the lack of political will to tackle the crime of trafficking.

Symbols of slavery in photographs testify to the tendency to link human trafficking to slavery with the aim of harnessing the moral potential of the anti-slavery movement. The enslavement of Serbian women by foreign men is a common motif in Serbian folklore, and the fear of it is deeply rooted in the national consciousness. Folklore poems reinforce the belief that women have inherent vulnerability to harms, are morally inferior, and are inclined to sin, as well as the idea that they need a male protector who will restore their and the national honour by saving them from the hands of the foreign abductor. In contemporary trafficking representations linked to slavery aesthetics, the issue of human trafficking is reduced to simplistic binaries of the free and the enslaved,

us and them, the human and the slaves, which further contributes to victims' dehumanisation. It is, therefore, possible that images of trafficking victims lead readers to re-establish their privileged position in terms of safety and agency, and reduce trafficked persons to helpless figures or fallen women responsible for their own misfortune. This paper also shows that in the process of selecting visual illustrations, online media in Serbia refuse to represent anybody but white women as victims of sexual exploitation. Not recognising that non-white women and men can also be possible victims could severely limit their chances of successfully exiting and recovering from situations of exploitation.

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# Rebooting Trafficking

Nicholas de Villiers

## Abstract

While popular psychology and appeals to emotion have unfortunately dominated discussions of ‘sex trafficking’, this article suggests that feminist psychoanalytic film theory and theories of affect are still useful for making sense of the appeal of sensational exposés like Lifetime Television’s *Human Trafficking* (2005). The dynamic of identification with (and impersonation of) a human trafficking ‘victim’ by the rescuing Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent (Mira Sorvino) is particularly worthy of scrutiny. Film theory about the ‘rebooting’ of film franchises (iconic brands like *Batman*) also helps explain the preponderance of similar programming—*Sex Slaves* (2005), *Selling the Girl Next Door* (2011), *Trafficked* (2016)—and the way contemporary discourses of human trafficking have effectively rebranded the myth of ‘white slavery’.

**Keywords:** white slavery, human trafficking, Lifetime Television, film theory, sex work, feminism

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*The ‘innocence’ of the victim was established through a variety of rhetorical devices: by stressing her youth/virginity; her whiteness; and her unwillingness to be a prostitute. The ‘innocence’ of the victim also served as a perfect foil for the ‘evil trafficker’; simplifying the reality of prostitution and female migration to melodramatic formula of victim and villain.*

—Jo Doezeema, ‘Loose Women or Lost Women? The re-emergence of the myth of “white slavery” in contemporary discourses of “trafficking in women”’

*Franchise film reboots ... seek to restart, rebrand and relaunch pre-sold iconographic product in order to further extend their economic and cinematic life-span.*

—William Proctor, 'Regeneration & Rebirth: Anatomy of the franchise reboot'

## Introduction

The terms 'human trafficking', 'sex trafficking', and 'sex slaves' retain immense currency and power, not only discursive dominance but also emotional power, what Sealing Cheng has called 'the hegemony of victimhood' (the ubiquity of the figure of the victim) and the 'affect of abolitionists' (strong emotional appeals by anti-prostitution campaigners).<sup>1</sup> While sex worker rights activist Maggie McNeill has predicted that the moral panic conflating prostitution with human trafficking may not last another decade of trenchant critique after its rise to prominence around the turn of the millennium,<sup>2</sup> the endurance of this mythological discourse suggests something millennial film viewers are now quite familiar with: the rebranding and 'rebooting' of a film franchise (for example, the *Batman* brand's latest instalment).<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, a recent video on MSN.com promoting Siddharth Kara's new film *Trafficked* (forthcoming 2016), based on his book *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery*, left me with a distinct feeling of *déjà vu*.<sup>4</sup> This 'new' movie recalls the big-budget, Emmy-nominated Lifetime Television mini-series *Human Trafficking* (2005), and the Emmy-winning sensational Canadian documentary *Sex Slaves* (2005; rebroadcast

<sup>1</sup> S Cheng, 'Labor of Love: The sex worker and the anti-trafficking advocate', keynote address at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture, and Society conference 'Sex and the Marketplace: What's love got to do with it?' Buenos Aires, Argentina, 28 August 2013.

<sup>2</sup> M McNeill, 'Cassandra', *The Honest Courtesan*, 2 January 2016, retrieved 4 February 2016, <https://maggiemcneill.wordpress.com/2016/01/02/cassandra/>

<sup>3</sup> W Proctor, 'Regeneration & Rebirth: Anatomy of the franchise reboot', *Scope: An online journal of film and television studies*, no. 22, February 2012, <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2012/february-2012/proctor.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> 'Professor's Human Trafficking Research Inspires Film', retrieved 4 January 2016, <http://www.msn.com/en-us/video/other/professors-human-trafficking-research-inspires-film/vi-BBo0Kr0>. Cf. L Agustín, 'Sex Trafficking', Counterpunch, 27 February 2012, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/02/27/sex-trafficking/>; R Weitzer, 'New Directions in Research on Human Trafficking', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 653, May 2014, pp. 6—24.

as *The Real Sex Traffic* by PBS Frontline), apparent adaptations of Victor Malarek's *The Natashas: Inside the new global sex trade* (2003).<sup>5</sup> The alternate subtitle of Malarek's book tells us more directly what interests readers and viewers: 'The Inside Story of Slavery, Rape, and Murder in the Global Sex Trade'.

Popular psychology and emotional appeal have too often been marshalled within prostitution abolitionist rhetoric to avoid evidence-based rational discussion—for example, invoking 'Stockholm Syndrome' to discount the voices of sex workers critical of the dominant 'pimp' narrative, or appealing to pathos in the rhetorical question 'how would you feel if your daughter was forced into prostitution?'<sup>6</sup> However, I will suggest that psychoanalytic film theory and affect theory can still help us make sense of the popular appeal of sensational documentary and fictionalised film exposés about the alleged epidemic of girls and women kidnapped and forced into the sex industry.

These cinematic representations highlight an important problem in film theory: the dynamic of identification,<sup>7</sup> specifically identification with the position of victim. I propose that the shocking exposé about 'sex trafficking' combines the dynamics of identification and 'affective mimesis' in the excessive and gendered 'body' genres identified by Linda Williams: pornography, horror, and melodrama.<sup>8</sup> By 'affective mimesis' I refer to the way the body of the spectator involuntarily mimics the emotion or sensation of the (usually female) body on screen. Moreover, I show how prurience, titillation, and transgression are still at work in

<sup>5</sup> C Duguay (Dir), *Human Trafficking*, (DVD), 2005; LaCrosse, WI, Echo Bridge Home Entertainment, 2006. The mini-series premiered on Lifetime Television on 24 and 25 October 2005 and broadcast in Canada on Citytv on 2 and 3 January 2006. *Sex Slaves*, television programme, directed by R Bienstock, 2005; Toronto, Canada: Associated Producers/Channel 4; rebroadcast as *The Real Sex Traffic*, PBS Frontline S24:E2, February 7, 2006. V Malarek, *The Natashas: Inside the new global sex trade*, 2003; New York, Arcade Publishing, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See 'Just Don't Call It Slut-Shaming: A feminist guide to silencing sex workers', *Feminist Ire*, 24 September 2012, retrieved 4 February 2016, <https://feministire.com/2012/09/24/just-dont-call-it-slut-shaming-a-feminist-guide-to-silencing-sex-workers/>

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Sigmund Freud first developed his psychoanalytic theory of identification using the example of agoraphobic bourgeois women's repressed identification with 'prostitutes'. See J Masson, (ed.), *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 182.

<sup>8</sup> L Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, genre, and excess', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, issue 4, Summer, 1991, pp. 2—13.

lurid anti-pornography texts.<sup>9</sup> Carole S. Vance has suggested the emergence of a subgenre of films about ‘sex trafficking’ that she terms the ‘melomentary’.<sup>10</sup>

## Human Trafficking: Thrilling and gut-wrenching

The following analysis of *Human Trafficking* alongside similar texts in the subgenre is less a ‘close reading’ than an examination of how the film’s formula is *marketed* and *consumed*. The tagline and plot summary for *Human Trafficking* manage to highlight the series’ appeal both to sensationalism—voyeuristic emotional identification with trauma<sup>11</sup> and shocking exposé—and to post-9/11 governmentality (national border crossing and border enforcement):

[Tagline:] Hundreds of thousands of young women have vanished from their everyday lives—forced by violence into a hellish existence of brutality and prostitution. They’re a profitable commodity in the multi-billion-dollar industry of modern slavery. The underworld calls them human traffic...

[Plot Summary:] When a sixteen-year-old girl from the Ukraine, a single mother from Russia, an orphaned seventeen-year-old girl from Romania, and a twelve-year-old American tourist become the victims of international sex slave traffickers, a specialized team of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) struggles to expose the worldwide network that has enslaved them. ICE agent Kate Morozov knows the horror of sexual exploitation first-hand and is dedicated to dismantling the network and bringing the ring’s kingpin to justice. From a torture chamber in Queens to the flesh-peddlers of Russia, the hunt is on as the fates of relentless ICE agents, the ruthless traffickers and their defenseless victims collide in a powder keg conspiracy of global proportions. (IMDb)

<sup>9</sup> See H Hester, *Beyond Explicit: Pornography and the displacement of sex*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> C Vance, ‘Innocence and Experience: Melodramatic narratives of sex trafficking and their consequences for law and policy’, *History of the Present*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2012, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> See E A Kaplan and B Wang (eds.), *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-cultural explorations*, University of Hong Kong Press, Hong Kong, 2004, p. 10.

This fictional but ostensibly realist film also bears a striking resemblance to another Canadian-US production *Sex Slaves*, billed as ‘a documentary exposé inside the global sex slave trade in women from the former Soviet Bloc’ released the same year. Both appear to be based on Malarek’s tabloid journalist-style book *The Natashas*, and this is proof of the convergence of acceptable narratives as much as anything (as seen in the stereotypical adjectives in the synopsis: government agents are *relentless*, traffickers are *ruthless*, and their victims are *defenceless*; but the notion that ‘human traffic’ is underworld terminology suggests initiation into a secret criminal language rather than the dominant discourse of criminology, governments, and NGOs).<sup>12</sup>

The tropes on which these texts rely have been identified by Rutvica Andrijasevic in terms of highly symbolic and stereotypical constructions of femininity (eastern European women as beautiful, eroticised and fetishised victims) and masculinity (eastern European men as criminals), which equate women’s migration with forced prostitution, encouraging women to stay at home, and foster the ‘common assumptions of criminalisation of eastern European societies in the post-1989 period’, fuelling the fear of ‘Russian Mafia’s expansion westwards’.<sup>13</sup>

While it is a work of sensational fiction, *Human Trafficking* attempts to anchor its sense of realism through these timely political anxieties and by ending with a series of talking points—such as, ‘the United States is one of the largest markets for sex slavery in the entire world’—from Polaris Project, one of the largest and most influential US anti-trafficking NGOs (formed in 2002).<sup>14</sup> A review on Amazon.com from 2014 suggests that

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Davies, *My Name Is Not Natasha: How Albanian women in France use trafficking to overcome social exclusion (1998–2001)*, Amsterdam University Press, 2009; C. Baker, ‘Moving Beyond “Slaves, Sinners, and Saviors”: An intersectional feminist analysis of US sex-trafficking discourses, law, and policy’, *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, no. 4, 2013, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.jfsonline.org/issue4/articles/baker/>; N. Berlatsky, ‘Hollywood’s dangerous obsession with sex trafficking’, *Salon*, 10 June 2014, retrieved 4 February 2016, [http://www.salon.com/2014/06/10/hollywoods\\_dangerous\\_obsession\\_with\\_sex\\_trafficking/](http://www.salon.com/2014/06/10/hollywoods_dangerous_obsession_with_sex_trafficking/)

<sup>13</sup> R. Andrijasevic, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, no. 1, 2007, p. 26, 34. Also see N. Nezvanova, ‘Trafficking Discourses and Sex Workers’ Mobilisation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia’, *Open Democracy*, 4 March 2016, retrieved 9 April 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/sws/netochka-nezvanova/trafficking-discourses-and-sex-workers-mobilisation-in-eastern-euro>

<sup>14</sup> Polaris Project, <https://polarisproject.org/about>. For a critique of Polaris Project see North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition/Sex Worker Activists, Allies and You, ‘Why are Sex Worker and Public Health Advocates Annoyed with Google?’, *Daily Kos*, 21 December 2011, retrieved 9 April 2016, <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/12/21/1047597/-Why-are-Sex-Worker-and-Public-Health-Advocates-Annoyed-with-Google#>



*Human Trafficking* is still being watched in classrooms as an instructional text: 'For those with weak stomach do not watch this! I watched this as part of a class at my university. This movie was thrilling and gut wrenching'.<sup>15</sup>

I suggest that the film's successful manipulation of these 'thrills' has to do with the way it aims to gratify both the voyeuristic and narcissistic drives combined in cinema. *Human Trafficking* does this by acting as a kind of mirror: in the same way that the US ICE enforcement agent (played by Mira Sorvino) is able to personally identify with the eastern European/Russian victims, so too the audience is asked to identify vicariously with the subject positions of both rescuing agent and victim. The narration's alternating point-of-view and suspenseful, intercut parallel action suggests what feminist psychoanalytic film theory has identified as the common sadomasochism of mainstream cinematic spectatorship.<sup>16</sup>

Mira Sorvino also clearly identified with her on-screen character, as she is currently an anti-trafficking activist working as a UN Goodwill Ambassador to Combat Human Trafficking along with evangelical Christian anti-trafficking missionaries (among other well-meaning celebrities with dubious qualifications as international spokespeople against human trafficking).<sup>17</sup> The blurring of Lifetime sensational fiction and CNN-sponsored journalistic 'reality' has therefore extended beyond the boundaries of the individual film: Sorvino appears to repeat lines from *Human Trafficking* in a recent documentary *Freedom Project: Every day in Cambodia* about her mission to Cambodia: 'the actress appears teary-eyed as she tells local men, "It's not okay to sell children to

<sup>15</sup> Amazon.com review by 'Carmen', 12 June 2014, retrieved 4 January 2016, [http://www.amazon.com/review/R5195NORMYR26/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00JP5L3JI&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=2858778011&store=instant-video](http://www.amazon.com/review/R5195NORMYR26/ref=cm_cr_dp_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00JP5L3JI&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=2858778011&store=instant-video)

<sup>16</sup> See L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in C. Penley (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory*, Routledge, New York, 1988, pp. 57–68.

<sup>17</sup> See L. Agustín, 'BBC Human Trafficking Debate now in UK: Mira Sorvino's moral outrage', *The Naked Anthropologist*, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.lauraagustin.com/bbc-trafficking-debate-online-in-the-uk-moral-outrage-from-mighty-aphrodite>; M. Moring, 'Mira Sorvino: Saving sex slaves', *Christianity Today*, 3 October 2012, retrieved 12 August 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/october-web-only/mira-sorvino-saving-sex-slaves.html>

pedophiles, it's not okay.”<sup>18</sup> This blending of genres in fact harkens back to the original cinematic combination of ‘actuality’ and melodrama within the famous early white slavery film *Traffic in Souls*.<sup>19</sup>

### ‘Lifetime: Television for Women’: Rebooting white slavery

Sorvino’s professional but strongly emotional character in *Human Trafficking* fits a particular generic formula established by the US cable network ‘Lifetime: Television for women’ in their ‘narrowcasting’ marketing geared toward women, especially their original made-for-TV movies.<sup>20</sup> Jackie Byars and Eileen R Meehan outline the Lifetime television movie formula in ‘Once in a Lifetime: Constructing “The Working Woman” through cable narrowcasting’, their contribution to a special issue of the feminist media studies journal *Camera Obscura* dedicated to Lifetime. They explain how ‘Lifetime’s basic formula for its World Premiere Movies (made specifically for Lifetime) revolves around a strong, competent woman who overcomes adversity. ... Female protagonists generally work within the system to correct some injury, often in a professional capacity’.<sup>21</sup> They clarify that Lifetime envisions female protagonists as white, ‘fully adult women with weaknesses, soft edges, and strong emotions’ and that this emphasis on emotions ‘inflects Lifetime’s productions with a distinctly melodramatic edge, regardless of genre. Lifetime consistently focuses on the personal and

<sup>18</sup> J Martinez, ‘Actress Mira Sorvino Premieres Cambodian sex trafficking documentary at Bayside megachurch’, *Christian Post*, 7 January 2014, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/actress-mira-sorvino-premieres-cambodian-sex-trafficking-documentary-at-bayside-megachurch-112146/>. Cf. M Tolson, ‘Mira Sorvino, CNN child-sex series is “shameful” for Cambodians’, *Asian Correspondent*, 20 December 2013, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://asiancorrespondent.com/117471/mira-sorvino-cnn-child-sex-series-shameful-for-cambodians/>; A E Moore, ‘Sex Work or Human Trafficking? Race and imperialism in CNN Report from Cambodia’, *Rewire*, 13 May 2013, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://rhrealitycheck.org/article/2014/05/13/race-imperialism-cnn/>

<sup>19</sup> See L Torchin, ‘Foreign Exchange’, in W Brown, D Iordanova, and L Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images: Cinema and trafficking in the new Europe*, St Andrews Film Studies, Scotland, UK, 2010, p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> See E Yahr, ‘From guilty pleasure to Emmy Awards: The delightfully weird history of Lifetime movies’, *The Washington Post*, January 15 2015, retrieved 9 March 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/01/15/from-guilty-pleasure-to-emmy-awards-the-delightfully-weird-history-of-lifetime-movies/>

<sup>21</sup> J Byars and E Meehan, ‘Once in a Lifetime: Constructing “the working woman” through cable narrowcasting’, *Camera Obscura* nos. 33–34, 1994, p. 26.

familial, even when the setting is institutional. Systemic challenge is rare...’<sup>22</sup> Eithne Johnson notes that, ‘[a]lthough Lifetime claims to avoid programs that depict women as victims, the network was probably well aware of the popularity of women-in-jeopardy programs’.<sup>23</sup> A similar contradiction can be seen in Lifetime’s ‘postfeminist’ private investigator drama *Veronica Clare*, whose protagonist is ‘a paradoxical character, and the series played with gender expectations raised by her unusual occupation as a lone, female sleuth’.<sup>24</sup> But Johnson argues that Lifetime’s unique hybridising of gendered genres allows for the network to ‘have it both ways’ in terms of essentialist versus constructionist understandings of femininity. They are ‘postfeminist’ in the way they benefit from the second-wave feminist emphasis on how ‘the personal is political’ and on social agency rather than victimhood, while also eschewing any explicit declarations of feminism and investing in essentialist notions of differences in ‘feminine’ psychology such as the tendency to blur boundaries between self and other.<sup>25</sup>

*Human Trafficking* perfectly exemplifies this desire to have it both ways (in terms of genre and feminism): it is a show about victims that nonetheless provides a white, professional, strong female role model for middle-class viewers in the form of a resourceful investigator who emotionally identifies with the women she works to ‘rescue’ (through a number of brutal, armed, door-kicking ICE brothel raids). While she takes risks that might be ethically questionable, she still works within the governmental system for which the film acts as unofficial propaganda (the credits indicate it was ‘produced in cooperation with the Department of Homeland Security’).

I would suggest that the screenplay for *Human Trafficking* might also be seen as borrowing liberally from the gendered FBI mentor-mentee psychological drama of identification in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), which foregrounds the female FBI agent’s desire for career advancement while negotiating her identification with vulnerable, lower-class female

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> E Johnson, ‘Lifetime’s Feminine Psychographic Space and the “Mystery Loves Company Series”’, *Camera Obscura*, nos. 33–34, 1994, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46. Byars and Meehan conclude that Lifetime remains commercially viable by ‘presenting television that provides role models for a way of life made possible by second wave feminism, but which Lifetime defines as feminine, never feminist’, p. 36.

victims.<sup>26</sup> *Human Trafficking* therefore manages to combine several generic elements from melodrama, horror, and crime drama, genres historically known for their skilful manipulation of identification with sexualised victims and rescuing agents.

*Human Trafficking* exemplifies the ways in which many of the tropes of media coverage around victims of sex trafficking and rescuers resonate with earlier preoccupations and myths. Jo Doezenia has traced the reemergence of the myth of ‘white slavery’ in the contemporary discourses of ‘trafficking in women’ which have gained increasing momentum worldwide, but perhaps especially among European and US feminists. Doezenia argues that ‘Modern concerns with prostitution and “trafficking in women” have a historical precedent in the anti-white-slavery campaigns that occurred at the turn of the century’. Doezenia notes that while the non-western/western subjects, locations, and geographical directions of the traffic have switched, the rhetoric sounds almost identical: ‘Then as now, the paradigmatic image is that of a young and naïve innocent lured or deceived by evil traffickers into a life of sordid horror from which escape is nearly impossible’.<sup>27</sup> This paradigmatic image is precisely the template employed by *Human Trafficking* and *Sex Slaves*, along with the multi-media Public Service Announcements (PSA) efforts of many anti-trafficking organisations (especially those with evangelical missions).

Arguably, the obsession with ‘white slavery’ and Orientalism still plays a prominent role, as seen in another Amazon.com review of *Human Trafficking* from 2014:

My own girls....who were young teens at the time considered themselves immortal. That nothing bad could happen to them. I would get the occasional eye rolling when I mentioned their safety so I decided to view the movie with them. The movie

<sup>26</sup> J Demme (dir.), *The Silence of the Lambs*, 1991.

<sup>27</sup> J Doezenia, ‘Loose Women or Lost Women? The re-emergence of the myth of “white slavery” in contemporary discourses of “trafficking in women”’, *Gender Issues*, vol. 18, no. 1, Winter 2000, pp. 23–50, available at <http://www.walnet.org/csis/papers/doezema-loose.html>. This is further developed in J Doezenia, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters*, Zed Books, London, 2010. Also see L Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007.

brings it home...with the pretty 16 year old...dreaming of a better life (Truly.... a universal dream of all teen girls to become famous...either at modeling, acting, singing...run away and make their fortune in the world with nothing ever bad happening.) However, it isn't long before this beautiful sweet 16 is in the clutches of a brutal sex trade. What is worse? She was a virgin.

An American young girl.....shopping on holiday with her mother...in a foreign country.....is kidnapped and held in a seedy, dirty dungeon of a basement with other young children.....until safe transport out of the country can be made for her. The fact that she is white, a blonde and a 12 year old virgin.....makes it clear that she will be the ultimate prize for a rich Saudi man. [ellipses in original]<sup>28</sup>

Doezema's text lays these 'white slavery' and 'sex trafficking' histories and discourses alongside one another in order to compare them in a way that is illuminating and immensely helpful as a form of demystification of a paradigm whose dominance is reflected in programmes like *Human Trafficking* and the above review.

*Human Trafficking* relies on almost identical melodramatic tropes: the innocent white trafficking victim as a foil for the 'evil trafficker' in the form of the 'kingpin' Sergei, played by the iconic villain actor Robert Carlyle, channelling his earlier performance as an international terrorist in the James Bond film *The World Is Not Enough*.<sup>29</sup> Ronald Weitzer calls this melodramatic generic representation of the trafficker a 'folk-devil stereotype'.<sup>30</sup> Commenting on *Human Trafficking* as a 'fantasy of management', Leshu Torchin notes that at the narrative level, the 'vast transnational threat is rendered singularly visible through the production

<sup>28</sup> Amazon.com review of *Human Trafficking* by 'Skillet Black', 20 September 2014, retrieved 4 January 2016, [http://www.amazon.com/review/RVZMB92D5389/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00JP5L3JI&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=2858778011&store=instant-video](http://www.amazon.com/review/RVZMB92D5389/ref=cm_cr_dp_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00JP5L3JI&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=2858778011&store=instant-video). I realise the risk in resting my analysis of the film's reception on an Amazon review, but I am inspired by a similarly bold move in D Halperin's *How to Be Gay* in an attempt to account for polarised responses to the camp melodrama *Mommie Dearest*. See D Halperin, *How to Be Gay*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2014, p. 175.

<sup>29</sup> M Apted (dir.) *The World Is Not Enough*, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, New York, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> R Weitzer, 2014, p. 9, 17.

of a single villain at the helm', thus tying the various threads of the women's stories together, and that the ICE agent Morozov similarly functions to bind them to a single point, with the conclusion demonstrating the efficacy of the agency in capturing Karpovich.<sup>31</sup> I would add that this sense of narrative closure (catching the 'bad guy') works to close off inquiry into the ongoing role of ICE enforcement on the lives of the women 'rescued'. A confrontational interrogation scene between Morozov and the women from the raided brothel now in custody informs us only that they will receive special visas in exchange for their cooperation with the investigation, but that they will be deported if they do not cooperate. Torchin notes that *Human Trafficking* and a similar television movie *Sex Traffic* (UK/Canada, 2004), suggest repatriation as the solution to provide 'narrative subjugation and confinement of the wandering women'.<sup>32</sup>

Clarifying the actual effects of the 'white slavery' panic on governmentality, Doezeema catalogues how '[t]he original, emancipatory thrust of the abolitionist movement, dedicated as it was to decreasing state control over poor women, ironically evolved to support a "social purity" agenda that would give the state new repressive powers over women and subaltern men'. Doezeema counters that despite this sensational and emotionally manipulative mythology, '[t]he majority of "trafficking victims" are aware that the jobs offered them are in the sex industry, but are lied to about the conditions they will work under'. Yet the rhetoric and tropes used in anti-trafficking campaigns still rely on the notion of the 'innocent', unwilling victim, and efforts to 'protect' these innocent women are combined with efforts 'designed to punish "bad" women: i.e. prostitutes'.<sup>33</sup> The revival of the 'white slavery' myth therefore has similar effects and repressive consequences for women.

As Kamala Kempadoo and others note in *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered*, the campaign against 'human trafficking' has been tied to post-9/11 'homeland security' (as we see in *Human Trafficking's* collaboration with the US Department of Homeland Security) as well as

<sup>31</sup> L. Torchin, 2010, p. 59.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> J. Doezeema, 2010; R. Weitzer, 2014, p. 16; M. Wijers, 'Purity, Victimhood and Agency: Fifteen years of the UN Trafficking Protocol', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 4, 2015, pp. 56–79, <http://www.antitraffickingreview.org>

conservative, anti-sex, and religious fundamentalist agendas.<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Bernstein explains this alliance in the US in terms of ‘militarized humanitarianism meets carceral feminism’, noting that despite renowned disagreements between abolitionist feminist and evangelical Christian activists around the politics of sex and gender, ‘these groups have come together to advocate for harsher penalties against traffickers, prostitutes’ customers, and nations deemed to be taking insufficient steps to stem the flow of trafficked women’. Bernstein argues that this alliance is the product of intersecting trends: ‘a rightward shift on the part of many mainstream feminists and other secular liberals away from a redistributive model of justice and toward a politics of incarceration’ coinciding with ‘a leftward sweep on the part of many younger evangelicals toward a globally oriented social justice theology’.<sup>35</sup> *Human Trafficking*’s lead actress Mira Sorvino’s fictional character and real world career illustrates this convergence, as we can see in a *Christian Post* headline ‘Actress Mira Sorvino premieres Cambodian sex trafficking documentary at Bayside megachurch’.<sup>36</sup> Carrie N Baker has also critiqued US anti-trafficking PSAs, mass media journalism, and movies like *Human Trafficking* for the way they represent innocent, virginal victims ‘as silenced or blinded, and in need of someone to speak or see for them’; here she includes an image from Facebook’s Human Trafficking newsfeed of a woman with her mouth covered by the words ‘Don’t be afraid to say it for her!’<sup>37</sup>

This ironic removal of a woman’s voice and agency in the name of rescue is precisely the problem, and *Human Trafficking* encourages this type of ventriloquism and impersonation through its manipulation of victim-identification. Alice Mihaela Bardan’s analysis of the Swedish film

<sup>34</sup> See K Kempadoo, ‘From Moral Panic to Global Justice: Changing perspectives on trafficking’, in *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New perspectives on migration, sex work, and human rights*, Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London, 2011, pp. vii–xxxiv. See also chapter by R Kapur in the same volume.

<sup>35</sup> E Bernstein, ‘Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The politics of sex, rights, and freedom in contemporary antitrafficking campaigns’, *Signs*, vol. 36, issue 1, 2010, pp. 45–71, quotation from abstract, p. 45. Cf. L egal and M McIntosh (eds.), *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the pornography debate*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1992.

<sup>36</sup> J Martinez, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> C Baker, 2013.

*Lilya 4-Ever* (2002) points out how the ‘typically earnest and tragic’ tale of a sexually exploited young migrant girl purports to ‘allow us an easy access to Lilya’s experience’ through the spectacle of her suffering, with the filmmaker attempting to put the viewer in Lilya’s position so that we can understand ‘how it feels’ and ‘what it must be like’ to be coerced into sexual relations with repulsive older men.<sup>38</sup> *Human Trafficking* features several similar scenes in brothels where we are encouraged to share in the repulsion of the girls toward fat, older men.

These cinematic scenes of degradation illustrate the lurid pornography of anti-pornography suggested above. To appropriate Freud’s insight about hysterical identification and distortion in dreams, here the subject manages to ‘suffer as it were for a whole host of others, and to play all the roles in a drama solely out of their own personal resources’.<sup>39</sup> Lifetime Television has perfected this form of sensational cinematic identification. While feminist psychoanalytic film theory has suggested many similarities between Hollywood film spectatorship and the work of dreams, I will propose that even ostensibly non-fiction television programming can offer related experiences of role-playing through victim-impersonation.

### Melomentary: *Selling the girl next door*

A good demonstration of the sensational tendency and trend in anti-trafficking discourse can be seen in a more recent ‘wake-up call’ issued by CNN reporter Amber Lyon’s *Selling the Girl Next Door* (2011), in which she argues that valuable government resources have been given to ‘foreign’ victims of sex trafficking while ignoring the domestic problem of girls ‘trafficked for sex’ using Internet adult classified ads on Craigslist.org or Backpage.com.<sup>40</sup> Like *Human Trafficking*, the audience is encouraged to see the menace of human trafficking as far more

<sup>38</sup> A Bardan, “‘Enter Freely and of Your Own Will’: Cinematic representations of post-Socialist transnational journeys”, in M Maciniak, A Imre, and Á O’Healy (eds.), *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*, Palgrave, New York, 2007, p. 99, 95, 101.

<sup>39</sup> I have quoted the translation in A De Mijolla, ‘Identification’, *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, Macmillan, New York, 2005, p. 787; cf. S Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), trans. J Strachey, Basic Books, New York, 2010, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> *Selling the Girl Next Door*, 2011, CNN and A Lyon, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/CRIME/01/20/siu.selling.girl.next.door.backpage/>. The video was uploaded by A Lyon to Vimeo: <http://vimeo.com/32746082>



widespread than they might have imagined, and like the ICE agent played by Sorvino who dresses up as a stereotypical subservient ‘Russian mail-order bride’ to position herself as a trafficking victim in order to catch the crime boss, Amber Lyon puts herself in ‘harm’s way’ by taking out an ad on Backpage.com using a photo of herself when she was under 18 and using adjectives like ‘innocent’ that she suggests indicate that she might be underage in order to disprove Backpage.com’s claim that they carefully screen out ads for underage girls.

Whether or not this media tactic of posing as underage should be seen as unethical as it constitutes entrapment (creating an unrealistic scenario to ensnare predatory would-be criminals as in *To Catch a Predator*), Lyon’s active positioning of herself as a ‘trafficking victim’ seems to weaken and hopelessly confuse the definition of trafficking victims as unwitting and unwilling. In order to seem ‘fair and balanced’, Lyon interviews Dennis Hof, the proprietor of a legal brothel in Nevada, the Moonlite BunnyRanch, the subject of two HBO documentaries *Cathouse* and *Cathouse 2* as well as a television reality series *Cathouse: The series*. Hof condemns ‘pimps’ as parasites and emphasises the safety and free agency of sex workers at his brothel (arguably, he profits directly from the anti-trafficking scare).

Just when it seems that Lyon is about to condemn ‘whorephobia’ and ‘whore stigma’ with respect to sex workers, she instead asserts that such stigma is unwarranted because ‘most sex workers began as underage sex trafficking victims’ which she ‘proves’ by interviewing three of over a dozen sex workers currently at the brothel, those who raised their hands in response to her question about who began selling sex as ‘underage’ and ‘trafficked’ (Weitzer reminds us that any minors assisted by middlemen are ‘ipso facto trafficking victims by law’<sup>41</sup>). None of the women use the term ‘trafficked’ to describe their experiences, but they do discuss exploitation by ‘pimps’ and that they entered the sex industry underage (‘I started ho-ing when I was 16’; ‘I got started in the sex industry when I was 15’; ‘I’ve been in the game since I was 13’). But Lyon’s programme is edited so as to make these few tragic stories representative of all sex work (including their current consensual and

<sup>41</sup> R Weitzer, p. 16–17. Cf. N Mai, ‘Between Embodied Cosmopolitanism and Sexual Humanitarianism: The fractal mobilities and subjectivities of migrants working in the sex industry’, in V Baby-Collin and L Anteby-Yemini (eds.), *Borders, Mobilities and Migrations: Perspectives from the Mediterranean in the 19-21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Peter Lang, Brussels, 2014.

legal work at the brothel). This has the double effect of infantilising adult women who are sex workers and equating sex work with trafficking. Moreover, the programme *Selling the Girl Next Door* romanticises and eroticises innocence and virginity in ways that do not break with the appeal of these very terms used in ads on backpage.com.

While Lyon may be aligned with a feminist ethos that refuses to blame the victim, and the victim is sometimes recast as survivor in such stories, in fact the expository mode of representation she uses (with a single anchor voice-over, despite her interactive and embedded journalism) cannot help but reinforce a victimology. Lyon retains a controlling voice and the subjects of the film are reduced to essentialised stereotypes. Despite the fact that Lyon is bodily present rather than absent in the programme, the ‘tradition of the victim’ described by Bill Nichols and Brian Winston still applies: ‘The victim would stand revealed as the central subject of documentary’.<sup>42</sup> Winston insists that documentary ‘most often displays the private inadequacies of the urban underclass, “in the bowels of the earth” in close-up’ and insists that by choosing victims, ‘documentarists abandoned the part supposedly played by those who comment publicly on society (the watchdogs of the guardians of power). Instead, in almost any documentary situation they are always the more powerful partner’.<sup>43</sup> He argues that documentary filmmakers who focus on victims ignore the ethical and moral implications of this development. In choosing to focus on victims, does Lyon comment critically on the guardians of power?

Lyon is apparently critical of the incarceration of young female ‘sex trafficking’ victims, but the programme’s agenda is still one of ‘carceral feminism’. Knowing its audience, the programme targets and excites parental concern, and is remarkably uncurious about why runaways might run away from home. While this might also be about not blaming the victim, the answer is determined by the viewership of the show: as is the standard for most mainstream television, the solution to family problems is a return to The Family.

<sup>42</sup> B Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1992, p. 91; B Winston, ‘The Tradition of the Victim in Griersonian Documentary’, in A Rosenthal (ed.), *New Challenges for Documentary*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, pp. 269–287; p. 274.

<sup>43</sup> B Winston, p. 276.

The term ‘melomentary’ has been suggested by Vance to describe programmes like *Selling the Girl Next Door*; she notes how many anti-sex trafficking videos employ ‘virtually identical titles, with “selling,” “innocence,” “bought,” and “sold” combining and recombining like mutant DNA’.<sup>44</sup> She argues that melodrama achieves maximum effect through the equation of parts with the whole (in Lyon’s case: select stories of underage victimisation are used to criticise the entire sex industry), severe decontextualisation (in Sorvino’s case, ignoring the complexity of migration narratives and the actual effects of raid-and-rescue operations on the lives of poor women and migrants), the juxtaposition of tangential or irrelevant examples that aim to shock (the tourist child kidnapping subplot in *Human Trafficking*), and a sustained effort to mobilise horror and excess (the visceral emotional response solicited by paradoxically pornographic anti-pornography texts).<sup>45</sup>

Gayle Rubin has noted that the rhetoric of the anti-prostitution and anti-pornography movement is less a sexology than a demonology, and she suggests that it functions primarily as a form of scapegoating, criticising the non-routine rather than ‘routine acts of oppression, exploitation, or violence’.<sup>46</sup> While Lyon’s programme does not necessarily call for legal brothels to be closed, and it appears well intentioned with regard to its criticism of the system of incarceration of ‘victims’ that is currently in place, it is clearly an abolitionist text that represents ‘pimps’ and ‘johns’ as unredeemable monsters. The programme attempts to persuade viewers and politicians to call for *Craigslist* and *Backpage.com* to be shut down in order to protect underage girls from being trafficked.

## A Message Waiting at the Receiver’s End

The powerfully emotive emphasis on child prostitution is also part of the legacy of the Victorian ‘white slavery’ discourse traced by Doezema and Vance, but updated for the internet age. Programmes like *Selling the*

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<sup>44</sup> C Vance, p. 203.

<sup>45</sup> C Vance, p. 203.

<sup>46</sup> G Rubin, ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality’, in H Abelove, M Barale, and D Halperin (eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 166.

*Girl Next Door* rely on the sexual shame, fear, and ‘knowingness’ of the viewers at home who simultaneously have their worst fears and stereotypes confirmed and can be shocked and appalled by what they have ‘learnt’.

This sort of authoritative speech about marginalised sexual subjects reveals who is authorised to speak, to whom, and with what truth-effects. David Halperin suggests that phobic discourses dramatise ‘the remarkable ease with which socially authorized individuals can communicate certain “truths” about such sexually marginal subjects: ‘if the message is already waiting at the receiver’s end, it doesn’t even need to be sent; it just needs to be activated’.<sup>47</sup> The most insidious aspect of such programmes is the way that they conflate human trafficking and sex work. This has very real effects on the lives of adult women and men affected by such policy-influencing journalism (especially with respect to civil liberties and work safety).<sup>48</sup>

These programmes rely for their effect on the notion of reaching viewers who had ‘no idea’ that ‘modern-day slavery’ even existed and was so widespread. They thus place their faith in exposure of a hidden world. Mira Sorvino and a young actress in Kara’s *Trafficked* named Charlie Kanter have stated that they were shocked to learn of the (alleged) prevalence of sex trafficking within the United States, as though their eyes are now open (‘eye opening’ is another cliché in viewer reviews). And yet, there is something potentially naïve and gullible in this very positionality and faith in exposure. The problem that confronts these actors and filmmakers thus remains: How to suspend our disbelief? What cinematic techniques can make audiences feel as if our eyes are open even as we are immersed in a conventional work of fiction?

<sup>47</sup> D Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a gay historiography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> The feminist website *The New Agenda* features a call to action inspired by the CNN programme: ‘NOW TAKE ACTION! Contact Voice Media Group, owner of Village Voice Media and ask them: Do you have a daughter? Do you know anyone who has a daughter? Is knowingly trafficking in teenage girls good business?’, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.thenewagenda.net/2011/01/22/watch-on-cnn-selling-the-girls-next-door/>. Cf. E N Brown, ‘Backpage.com sues federal government over SAVE Act,’ *Reason*, 15 December 2015, retrieved 4 February 2016, <https://reason.com/blog/2015/12/15/backpage-sues-loretta-lynch>

*Human Trafficking* features oddly ‘meta’ moments where the characters sceptically call attention to the clichés of the genre: Sergei (Carlyle) says the ICE investigator (played by Donald Sutherland) sounds like ‘old TV cop shows’ and Kate (Sorvino) calls attention to how hers ‘is an extremely *mediagenic* case: we have an innocent young girl, trafficked across American borders, sold as a sex slave and murdered’. One Eastern European trafficking victim calls attention to Kate’s privilege as a ‘righteous American bitch’ who thinks she can simply ‘walk in my shoes’ (but then she does, literally donning the appropriate costume). Another questions whether Kate’s confession of being sexually abused by her Russian uncle at the age of 12 can be compared to her own experience of daily sexual abuse and humiliation. But both women recant these accusations, the latter suggesting ‘I guess it’s not that different’.

What is at work here is an aggressive form of empathy, mirroring what President George W. Bush called ‘the Army of Compassion’.<sup>49</sup> A vigilante mentality can coexist with faith in Homeland Security/ICE raid-and-rescue operations, which is embodied in the film by a woman named Ellen, an NGO activist in the Philippines with Stop Trafficking International. She confronts white male tourists on the street with her video camera and asks if the Filipino girls or boys they are with are their daughters or sons or were just ‘rented for an hour’, reminding them that in America ‘we now have laws’ against what they are doing (reflecting Bush’s campaign against sex tourism, ‘Operation Predator’<sup>50</sup>). Her video camera records images of these men in order to shame them publicly. She insists that this is not ‘brave’ but is more ‘painful and scary actually—this could be your neighbor, your dentist, your accountant, heaven forbid a member of your family!’

The camera in *Human Trafficking* assumes this same panoptic gaze of surveillance, what Melissa Gira Grant calls ‘The Carceral Eye’.<sup>51</sup> It works to effectively discipline not only the women and men represented in the film, but also the ‘liberal’ middle-class viewer aligned with both the victim and the sadistic/legalistic voyeur. In psychoanalytic film theory

<sup>49</sup> G Bush, ‘Remarks at the National Training Conference on Human Trafficking in Tampa, Florida, July 16, 2004’, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George W. Bush* 2004, Book II—July 1 to September 30, 2004, United States Government Printing Office, 2007, p. 1350.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1353.

<sup>51</sup> M Grant, *Playing the Whore: The work of sex work*, Verso, Brooklyn, New York, 2014, pp. 8—11.

this alignment operation is called ‘ideological suture’.<sup>52</sup> As David Christopher explains, the term suture refers broadly to ‘the suspension of disbelief that cinematic techniques encourage in viewers to foster their emotional complicity with the film’s ideological agenda’.<sup>53</sup> This emotional and ideological complicity is achieved primarily by manipulating the dominant point of view and thus point of identification for the viewer. ‘Melomentary’ is particularly effective at fostering the viewer’s emotional and ideological complicity via victim-identification. The fantasy that we can know ‘what it feels like’ is what I have called aggressive empathy, but it only takes the form of victim-masquerade by the detective in the above examples.

## Conclusion

The many ‘melomentaries’ on sex trafficking analysed here have undoubtedly unleashed emotion and a sense of urgency, but Vance argues that they also narrow the frame of analysis and action, especially in the way they ‘appear to address, yet defer, questions of globalization and inequality’, ultimately telling simplistic stories that function to ‘entertain and absolve’.<sup>54</sup> Migrants’ complex experiences of vulnerability and resilience (including the experiences of minors selling sex) have been ‘reductively simplified by the onset of a de-politicising representation of the world’ identified by Nicola Mai within ‘sexual humanitarian “protectionist” narratives’ which, he argues, actively contribute to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of migrants and minors selling sex.<sup>55</sup>

Abolitionists frequently act as if their virtuous ends justify their means, namely producing melodramas about female sexual innocence as the definitive representation of ‘true’ victimhood. Presumably this ends-justify-the-means attitude also justifies vastly inflated and mystified statistics. But Kempadoo cautions that hyperbole, ‘unsubstantiated claims, and sensationalism’ may help rustle up ‘indignation and moral condemnation’ about exploitation, but they can often lead to greater abuse

<sup>52</sup> K Silverman, ‘Suture [Excerpts]’, in P Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A film theory reader*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, pp. 219–235; p. 224.

<sup>53</sup> D Christopher, ‘The Allegory of Apartheid and the Concealment of Race Relations in District 9’, *Online International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2013, pp. 40–46.

<sup>54</sup> C Vance, p. 203, 200.

<sup>55</sup> N Mai, p. 1.

and violations, wherein '[p]oor women's sexuality is used to mobilise anti-trafficking sympathy, funds, and global attention' for increased policing and monitoring of borders, while, at the same time, 'the women's decisions and "choices" are denied legitimacy'.<sup>56</sup>

The likelihood of harmful results, or 'collateral damage',<sup>57</sup> is why it is incumbent on critics and audiences to question the resurgence, rebranding, and rebooting of the myth of white slavery in contemporary anti-trafficking media campaigns. In particular, we should be wary of their reliance on emotional and visceral cinematic identification with the rescuer. The effects and consequences of these melodramatic representations on law and policy can be extrapolated from the fact that in *Human Trafficking* the spectator is urged to identify with an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent. The mise-en-scène reinforces this identification with symbols of control and institutional power through its attention to the uniforms and insignia of the ICE and Homeland Security.

Perhaps, and especially when it comes to sex work, our expectations profoundly determine what we are willing to see or hear. As Laurenn McCubbin succinctly puts it, 'People love to see the things they think they already know about sex work reflected back at them'.<sup>58</sup> Thus, rather than seeing the existence of a 'secret world' revealed to us (i.e. faith in exposure; opening our eyes to something unexpected), these programmes confidently activate confirmation bias about the sex industry, sex tourism, and villains versus victims. This is also what makes for an effective 'reboot' of a franchise: the appearance of starting a cinematic universe again from scratch, but inevitably activating an intertextual array of iconography that feels familiar and is 'pre-sold' to the audience. *Human Trafficking* ends with a credit copyright '2005 For Sale Productions'. Perhaps it is time to end demand for this sort of programme.

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<sup>56</sup> K Kempadoo, pp. xxi—xxii.

<sup>57</sup> See M Wijers, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> M Shelton, 'Domestic Chatter with Laurenn McCubbin', *Spolia*, 13 September 2013, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.spoliamag.com/domestic-chatter-with-laurenn-mccubbin/>

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# The Art of the Possible: Making films on sex work migration and human trafficking

Sine Plambech

## Abstract

Fiction films and documentaries increasingly bring the themes of sex work migration and human trafficking to the big screen. The films often focus on women who have experienced a range of abusive conditions within the sex industry, experiences which in the films typically are all labelled ‘trafficking’ and narrated through the capture of innocents and their rescue. Images of ‘sex slaves’ have thus entered the film scene as iconic figures of pain and suffering, and ‘traffickers’ have emerged as icons of human evil. Building upon the substantial scholarly critique of such films and representations, this article discusses the possibilities of making films about migrant sex workers (some of whom may be trafficked) that do not fall into misleading and sensationalised representations. I draw upon two films about women migrant sex workers that I have worked on as an anthropologist and filmmaker—*Trafficking* (2010)<sup>1</sup> and *Becky’s Journey* (2014).<sup>2</sup> The point of departure is that there are a range of other aspects that can influence the filmmaking process rather than merely a one-dimensional perspective on sex work and trafficking. While analysing the making of these two films I look at the reasons—both theoretical and practical—for certain production decisions and the ways in which films in the context of multiple challenges are often the result of *the art of the possible*.

**Keywords:** human trafficking, sex work, documentary films, migration, anti-trafficking, visual anthropology

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<sup>1</sup> S Plambech and J Lansade (dirs.), *Trafficking*, 58 min., DR1 & DFI, Denmark, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> S Plambech (dir.), *Becky’s Journey*, 25 min., Denmark, 2014.

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## Introduction

Fiction films and documentaries increasingly bring sex work migration and human trafficking to the big screen. Film production on these ‘hot topics’ comes as no surprise—films reflect what is on the popular agenda more broadly. Within this growing number of films on sex work and the sex industry, there has been in particular a surge of films on the migration of (undocumented) female sex workers.<sup>3</sup> These films often focus on women who have experienced a range of abusive conditions within the sex industry, experiences which are typically all labelled ‘trafficking’ and narrated through the capture of innocents and their rescue. Other films claim that they provide never-before-seen insights into the criminal underworld as narrated by (the often crying) women themselves performing testimonial truths. The fiction film *Lilja 4-ever*,<sup>4</sup> the Academy Award winning documentary *Born into Brothels: Calcutta’s red light kids*,<sup>5</sup> the fiction film *Taken* (2008),<sup>6</sup> and recently, the documentary *The Price of Sex: An investigation of sex trafficking*,<sup>7</sup> among numerous others have come to shape the image of sex work, human trafficking and sex work migration. Some of the films are about transnational migration, others are careless portrayals equating sex work to trafficking, but in general they all make use of victim narratives of women or/and children to convey their message. Images of ‘sex slaves’ have in these ways entered the film scene as iconic figures of pain and suffering, and ‘traffickers’ have emerged as icons of human evil.

Such films and representations of human trafficking have already been thoughtfully criticised within cultural and critical trafficking studies.<sup>8</sup> These

<sup>3</sup> For example, see films discussed in J Arthurs, ‘Distant Suffering, Proper Distance: Cosmopolitan ethics in the film portrayal of trafficked women’, *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, vol. 8, issue 2-3, 2012, pp. 141—158; W Brown, D Iordanova and L Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images: Cinema and trafficking in the new Europe*, St Andrews Film Studies, St Andrews, 2010; R Campbell, *Marked Women: Prostitutes and prostitution in the cinema*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> L Moodysson (dir.), *Lilja 4-ever*, Sweden/Denmark, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Z Briski and R Kauffmann (dirs.), *Born into Brothels: Calcutta’s Red light kids*, USA, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> P Morel (dir.), *Taken*, 93 min., Europacorp/M6 Films, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> M Chakarova (dir.), *The Price of Sex: An investigation of sex trafficking*, USA, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> R Andrijasevic, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, 2007, pp. 24—44; J Arthurs, 2012; C Parreñas Shimizu, ‘Screening Sexual Slavery? Southeast Asian gonzo porn and US anti-trafficking law’, *Sexualities*, vol. 13, issue 2, 2010, pp. 161—170; S P Shah, ‘Brothels and Big Screen Rescues—Producing the idea of “prostitution in India” through documentary film’, *Interventions: International journal of postcolonial studies*, vol. 15, issue 4, 2013, pp. 549—566.

important and critical perspectives have analysed how few of these films articulate the complexities of sex work, poverty, immigration law and human desires for social mobility, but rather often constitute a site for production of generalised and sensationalised understandings of sex work-related migration and ‘women as victims’. Svati Shah terms this group of films the ‘anti-prostitution subgenre of documentary films’<sup>9</sup> and argues that the films are not merely products of political or moral positions towards sex work, but also the products of the filmmaking tradition itself, which commonly builds scripts over conflicts and drama, a framework within which sex slaves and saviours work iconographically well, and where these kinds of ‘truths’ serve an easy narrative function. Shah has identified five characteristics of the ‘anti-prostitution subgenre of documentary films’: the films 1) refuse to consider sex work as a livelihood option; 2) maintain an exclusive focus on women and girls; 3) have a narrative arc that begins by articulating sex work as violence and ends with scenes of rescue; 4) conflate sex work with violence and/or trafficking, and finally 5) overlook any organising efforts among sex workers or migrant communities.<sup>10</sup> Taken together these analyses show how, in several fictional and documentary films, filmmakers reiterate an old story of ‘western saviors rescuing brown or poor white Eastern European women from their dead-end lives in brothels and Red Light Districts’.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Wendy Hesford<sup>12</sup> illuminated how certain representations of suffering and victimhood construct only certain bodies and populations as victims, and how these are incorporated into human rights discourses geared toward humanitarian interventions.

Yet, despite these poignant critiques from scholars analysing human trafficking, sex work migration and victimhood on film, there is a discrepancy between rightfully criticising films on the one hand, and understanding or exploring the filmmaking process on the other. While the film industry certainly produces sensationalised films on these topics, there are a range of other aspects that influence the filmmaking process

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<sup>9</sup> S P Shah, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 558.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* This citation refers to ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ by Gayatri Spivak in R C Morris (ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the history of an idea*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> W S Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human rights visions, recognitions, feminisms*, Duke University Press, 2011.

than merely a perspective on sex work and trafficking that lacks nuance. Filmmakers are limited by time, resources (financial and human), access, ethical responsibilities and programme formats, to name but a few. Moreover, filmmakers want to make a film that people might actually want to watch, and there is the need to present a coherent, comprehensible document—a good story. Thus, from a filmmaker's perspective it might seem that often, little is understood about the conditions of filmmaking by many who write about film, but have never made one. This article is about the multiple challenges of filmmaking. The point is not to pose filmmakers' experience against the written analysis of films; rather this article discusses how to make films about transnational migrant female sex workers (some of whom may be trafficked) that do not fall into a misleading sensationalised capture/rescue plot device. While analysing the making of two films about women migrant sex workers I aim to look at the reasons—both theoretical and practical—for certain production decisions.

Since 2003 as an anthropologist I have worked among women migrants, primarily sex work migrants or/and marriage migrants, from and in Thailand and Nigeria who travel to Europe. Theoretically I primarily find kinship with critical trafficking studies and transnational feminist theory. Having these theoretical foundations as my point of departure I have become increasingly interested in the collaboration between anthropology and film and the potential of research-based films to produce counter-narratives to dominant stereotypes or representations within a range of themes, particularly countering dominant images of women migrants and sex workers. As an anthropologist and filmmaker I have been involved in, co-directed and directed five documentaries on the topics of marriage migration from Thailand to Denmark, sex work migration to Europe, and Thai women in the sex tourism industry in Thailand. Combining my work as an anthropologist and filmmaker I have had to face numerous practical, ethical and representational choices to make these documentaries. Hence, this article also reflects upon the relationship of research to film production.

In the article I draw upon two films I have worked on—*Trafficking* (2010) and *Becky's Journey* (2014). The two films serve as case studies to discuss the practical and ethical implications of making films about these issues. It is not that the two films have solved the above-mentioned challenges,

or that there are no nuanced films on these topics already.<sup>13</sup> The article is an invitation into the laboratory of filmmaking, into an ongoing dialogue to explore how the two films reflect the politics of filmmaking and representations of sex work migration and human trafficking. The critiques of many existing filmic representations of sex work migration and human trafficking are crucial and well-placed, yet documentaries are, of course, not documents of objective truths, they are communication products that entail processes of performance and translation. Therefore one argument I make is that we have to understand films—the final products—as expressions of *the art of the possible*, each produced in a political and economic context. I secondly argue that we have to explore not only how sex work migration and human trafficking are represented on film but also how the films are produced, because the process of making films affects how human trafficking and sex work related migration are shown to audiences.

## The Two Films

Shot in Copenhagen, Denmark, *Trafficking*, which I co-directed with Judith Lansade, follows the specially appointed anti-trafficking-squad of the Copenhagen police force over the course of six months. Through two policewomen, Anne and Trine, the film brings the viewer into a number of specific cases, such as a raid among Nigerian women in the red light district, the unravelling of a presumed Romanian trafficking network and the case against Mary, a suspected Nigerian madam. Despite public and political demand for police intervention to combat trafficking, the anti-trafficking squad struggles to resolve the individual cases and bring traffickers to court. The women migrants often do not denounce their purported traffickers and, at times, emerge as merely ‘extras’ in the broader field of anti-trafficking interventions. The film is set during the process in which the women are in the phase of being identified as either ‘victims of human trafficking’ or ‘undocumented migrants’. The film seeks to

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<sup>13</sup> Examples are *Otras Vías* (Spain/Germany, 2002); *Taking the Pledge*, USA, 2006; *Normal*, Italy/UK, 2012; *Collateral Damage*, USA, 2014; *One Day*, Denmark, 2008; *Little Soldier*, Denmark, 2008; *Last Rescue in Siam*, Thailand, 2012; *Creative Trafficking*, Canada, 2012. For a more comprehensive list see *Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival Archives*, retrieved 15 July 2016, <http://www.sexworkerfest.com/videos/>

illuminate the paradoxes of migration control, policing and humanitarianism in a Danish context while simultaneously pointing to the broader dilemmas within global migration governance. The film shows how, compared to the options they have in Nigeria, sex workers see their work in Denmark as a way to earn a living and are, therefore, not interested in denouncing their traffickers or being sent home.

Shot in Benin City, Nigeria, *Becky's Journey*<sup>14</sup> is about Becky, a 26-year-old Nigerian woman, who feels stuck in Nigeria after two failed attempts to go to Europe. The film is based on a series of interviews conducted in an apartment in the centre of Benin City and intercut partly with sequences of everyday life where viewers sense the feelings of limbo and immobility that permeate Becky's life, and partly with archive footage that illustrates Becky's memories of her journey and of her emotional state of mind. We see images of the desert, shot from a moving truck, images of migrants resting under a shady tree, images of the ocean, of ship wrecks, of old military barracks, of various cityscapes, of birds in the sky and of rough winds stirring up a group of palm trees. Some of these images adhere directly to Becky's story. Others are chosen for their poetic qualities in an effort to make Becky's 'inner life' felt by audiences. They serve as appropriations that make it possible for audiences to identify with Becky—to feel her stories, memories and emotions.

I met Becky during field work in Benin City, southern Nigeria, from where many Nigerian women leave for Europe. In some areas of Benin City there is a high risk of assault, robbery and, at times, kidnapping, and a local woman seen with a white person, such as me, might be in danger, which required me to take a range of ethical precautions. Basic anthropology ethics, and indeed wider research ethics, teach a 'do no harm' principle. Thus, to protect my informants (and myself), I decided, in collaboration with them, to conduct most of the interviews with them in my rented hotel-apartment in the centre of Benin City. The hotel had approximately ten armed guards, high surrounding walls, barbed wire

<sup>14</sup> *Becky's Journey* has been screened at numerous film festivals in the US, Mexico, Europe, Africa and Asia and won *Best Documentary Award* at the Let's All Be Free Film Festival, London 2015 and the *Award of Excellence* at the International Film Festival For Family, Public Service, Against Drug Abuse and Trafficking, Indonesia 2015. *Trafficking* was screened on Danish national TV as well as at numerous international festivals and nominated for the *Danish Dox Award* and *Politiken Audience Award*.

and a small restaurant so I could stay at the compound after dark. Conducting fieldwork in such an environment raises a range of questions about what type of data can be produced and how close you can get to your informants' everyday lives. I began to think about these security problems as contributing positively to my research, rather than constraining me. For instance, I distributed disposable cameras to the women that I could not visit. Furthermore, I realised some of the benefits of this type of 'in-house ethnography'. Over time I came to spend many hours with the women as they 'hung out' at my place, instead of me 'hanging out' at their places. In my apartment there were no family members to listen to our conversations or daily chores to take care of. Often they would come alone or together, sit on the couch, watch cable TV, eat and chat. This produced conversations which could continue for days. Becky felt safe and free to talk. *Becky's Journey* is a result of such long-term conversations where Becky stayed in my apartment almost every day for several weeks as her life history unfolded on camera.

## The Production of Counter-narratives

Anthropological research often aims at structural levels of analysis based on observation and interviews, whereas films usually leave less room for explicit historical and cultural analysis in their effort to communicate human experience and emotions and to construct forms of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> To create a more sensory-based filmic language, I chose to refrain from making my anthropological analysis explicit in the films—for instance in the form of a voice-over. Instead, I wanted the films to open up and question existing representations of sex work migration and trafficking, and perhaps with time even propel new readings and produce counter-narratives. Basically I wanted the films to speak for themselves, offering open endings rather than normative answers (closed endings) to the complex realities of the migrant women's lives. An example of a closed ending is one in which a migrant sex worker is portrayed as 'rescued by the police' and successfully deported to 'a better life' in Nigeria. In the final scenes of *Trafficking*, we see the policewomen Anne and Trine stack the multiple folders of police

<sup>15</sup> N Lutkehaus and J Cool, 'Paradigms Lost and Found: The "crisis of representation" and visual anthropology' in J M Gaines and M Renov (ed.), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, pp. 116—139.

files that did not lead to any prosecution of purported traffickers, illustrating the Sisyphean task of bringing the complexity of trafficking to the courtroom. In the final scenes of *Becky's Journey*, we hear Becky state that: 'I have two plans—one is to stay in Nigeria, the other is to go to Europe', pointing to ambiguities of the protagonists' desires and trajectories and open endings.

The challenge of such open-ended films, however, is that viewers might read them in multiple ways. No clear-cut message is conveyed, and therefore such films can be (mis)used politically for multiple purposes. For instance, when Becky early in the film states that she does not believe in trafficking, rather 'it is a bargain between the both parties' (between the madam and the migrant and/or the migrant's family), it could lead to questioning whether women like Becky, who knowingly violate immigration laws and are not coerced to migrate and sell sex, should have any rights at all when they arrive in Europe. Thus, presenting the complexities of women's motives for migration, and not merely presenting them as 'sex slaves', is an approach, it could be argued, that leaves greater responsibility to viewers in discussing and navigating questions of agency versus victimhood and 'forced' versus 'voluntary' dichotomies.

## Ethical obligations

Films centre—first and foremost—on the people they portray. The participants in the films represent themselves; the story is about them. Ultimately, films do not claim any generalisability. However, I chose to follow Becky, Trine and Anne because they shared similarities with several other informants and institutions I encountered throughout my research within the fields of sex work migration and human trafficking. In this way, the films support João Biehl's argument that '[f]ollowing the plot of a single person can help one to identify the many networks and relations...in which regimes of normalcy and ways of being are fashioned and, thus, to capture both the densities of localities and the rawness of uniqueness'.<sup>16</sup> These individuals (and institutions) are, of course, inscribed in, produced within, and productive of a larger context.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> J G Biehl, *Vita: Life in a zone of social abandonment*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005, p. 478.

<sup>17</sup> C Giordano, 'Practices of Translation and the Making of Migrant Subjectivities in Contemporary Italy', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 35, issue 4, 2008, pp. 588—606.



The exposure of individual people in front of the camera raises ethical questions. In written research, informants and localities are usually anonymous, making it easier to reveal intimate details about people's lives without direct implications for them. Certainly, the ethical aspects of including informants in films are of great importance where the informants cannot always be anonymous; therefore, I (as filmmaker and researcher) have the responsibility to consider the ethical aspects of exposing the informants in the public domain. Filmmakers, anthropologists and broadcasters all have ethical guidelines on anonymity. Yet, in filmmaking, anonymity carries its own implications.

Blurred faces and silhouettes are widely used to anonymise participants within crimes genres in journalism and documentary films. These anonymising tools often come to serve as markers of deviance and criminality.<sup>18</sup> Such tools have to be carefully applied in documentaries within the field of sex work migration and trafficking as not to reiterate objectifying tendencies of women in the sex industry. In *Trafficking* we tried to avoid these genre tropes and their consequences by filming the women's hands and shoes, or their hair from the back, to provide more personal images, instead of the potentially more objectifying blurred faces. We see the hand lifting the cup to drink tea, a shoe that moves, hair that is braided, while with the blurred face the viewer cannot see such subtle details. It can be asked if this strategy was in any way sufficient to give migrant sex workers more 'face' and identity, but this seemed to be the best practical solution. However, in some instances, like a photo of the madam 'Mary', and when filming in the streets, we had to blur faces for ethical reasons and limited technical alternatives.

This discussion of filming and exposure plays into larger debates on representation and migrant sex workers' agency. Because we as researchers have an immense responsibility towards our interlocutors, and because sex work migration and human trafficking are such stigmatising concepts, the responsibility is arguably even bigger. While some did not want to participate in the films, others *wanted* to tell their stories, photograph their lives (in a disposable camera project I conducted in Benin City) and be filmed. As Sonia, deported from Italy, explained: 'There is no problem, you can film me, you can use my photos...I am not a criminal.' For Sonia,

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<sup>18</sup> J K Haaken and M O'Neill, 'Moving images: Psychoanalytically informed visual methods in documenting the lives of women migrants and asylum seekers', *Journal of Health Psychology*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2014, pp. 79–89.

leaving her out of the frame or blurring her face would reduce her participation in the representation of her own life. The ethical dilemma, which emerges here, is that the ambition of protecting the women could end up reproducing the stereotypical and objectifying images that we seek to deconstruct.

A key ethical problem then is how to include the perspectives of the migrant women in representations of their lives, without compromising ethical concerns? How do we avoid reproducing voyeuristic ways of looking at migrant sex workers and understand their points of view if they are only represented as blurred faces? As Wendy Chapkis<sup>19</sup> argues, '[m]ost victims of migrant or sex worker abuse can speak for themselves when allowed to do so'. The question is how we take this agency perspective seriously when it comes to the women's decision about being part of a film? The ethical problem is that just as there should be a focus on anonymity, there are also ethical implications of *not* allowing the voices and faces of the women to appear in the name of protecting them. Ethical concerns should not contribute to reproductions of sex work migrants as either crying objects of compassion *or* as blurred objectified faces. The challenge then is to recognise and include agency while paying attention to the ethical implications of doing so.

The solution I saw was to be pragmatic and creative in the process of filmmaking. Becky did not have any objections to being filmed, neither while I interviewed her in my apartment nor while she was doing everyday chores in her house. Some of her friends did not want to be filmed, so we agreed to keep them out of the camera's focus or only film their hands. Furthermore, I found it crucial to trust the women's own judgment of what could be told and could not. The women in this study were—throughout the research—very well aware of what they wanted to disclose and what they wanted to leave out of our conversations. Thus, as the films were anchored in anthropology and not investigative journalism, my approach was simply to let the women decide what they wanted to tell, and not push them to give details they did not want to discuss.

<sup>19</sup> W Chapkis, 'Soft Glove, Punishing Fist: The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000' in E Bernstein and L Schaffner (eds.), *Regulating Sex—The politics of intimacy and identity*, Routledge, New York & London, 2003, pp. 51–66.

## The Practice of Filmmaking

Filmmaking is not merely about theoretical questions of representation but often much more about everyday challenges in order to proceed and make the film at all. Depending on the context, it is at times necessary not only to simplify the broader analytical perspectives in order to make the film comprehensible to larger audiences, but also to accommodate ethical, practical and political concerns. Such ‘practicalities’ at times influence the representations of the subject matter. In *Trafficking*, for instance, the funder and broadcaster, Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR1), insisted on explanatory labels carrying the terms ‘illegal migrant’ instead of ‘undocumented migrant’ and ‘prostitute’ rather than ‘sex worker’. DR1 did not trust their viewers to understand the meanings of these preferred terms and decided to name the migrants ‘illegal’ and the sex workers ‘prostitutes’. This posed a dilemma for me and played into the broader challenge of narrowing down anthropological knowledge and analytical context to communicate to a broader audience without lengthy contextualisation and explanation. Furthermore, making films about migration often involves some introduction to immigration law in order to understand the legal status of the migrant characters, because this status (or lack thereof) might be the central motivator for the character’s actions. This is why *Trafficking* has a scene in which the policewomen Anne and Trine explain the legal framework of human trafficking. This challenge poignantly illustrated the difference between written research and visual representation to larger audiences.

Following the police unit in Copenhagen formed part of my focus on migration control as a domain of investigation. The idea was to explore how the ‘immigration apparatus’<sup>20</sup> revealed itself ethnographically primarily in the red light district. This recognises that migration control and border control are not only located at the geographical European nation-state borders, but they also encompass broader spaces where migration control, because of the Schengen Agreement, can take place in demarcated spaces such as airports and red light districts. For migrants, this multiplication of borders means they can be confronted with ‘border control’ at any time in a variety of places.<sup>21</sup> In the effort to explore the

<sup>20</sup> G Feldman, *The Migration Apparatus: Security, labor, and policymaking in the European Union*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> S Hess, ‘How Gendered is the European Migration Regime? A feminist analysis of the anti-trafficking apparatus’, *Ethnologia Europea*, vol. 42, issue 2, 2012, pp. 51—68.

workings of one of the institutions—the police—which is by far the most present and anxiety-inducing institution in the lives of undocumented migrant sex workers—as well as exploring the mindset of the people working there (in this case, specifically within the anti-trafficking unit)—I chose to focus on the perspective of the police.

By and large, *Trafficking* is filmed from the perspective of the police; we see the red light district through their gaze (as a workspace for the police) and not from the women's point of view. In this way *Trafficking* risks creating an uncritical identification with the police officers and their point of view, and might lead audiences to see the film as sympathetic to the rationalities of the police. Therefore one concern in following a police squad and their raids in the red light district was that *Trafficking* could echo numerous anti-trafficking films produced as 'tales of rescue',<sup>22</sup> where journalists (often from media outlets and with hidden cameras) raid brothels with local policemen to 'rescue' the women. The intention in *Trafficking* was to show what happens after these rescue missions and interventions. Therefore, the film focuses on the many confrontational and paradoxical scenes where the 'rescued' women are more or less forced to talk to the police. Ambiguities emerge during these interrogations, and scenes show the discrepancies between the perspectives of the migrants and those of the police.

By contrast, the challenge of making *Becky's Journey* had more to do with access. Initially, I intended to film larger groups of deportees in their everyday life in Benin City outside of institutional realms. Yet, because the field of undocumented migration and trafficking is so clandestine and beset with safety concerns, I realised that filming Becky in my apartment as she told me her story was the best option.

The difficulties of filming the women's lives in Benin City outside the confined spaces of anti-trafficking institutions highlight another aspect of representation: namely, the fact that broadcasters and film crews often opt for being embedded with anti-trafficking institutions or/and local security guards or the police to get their stories. The problem with this is twofold. First, there is the problem of institutions which might have a

<sup>22</sup> R Galusca, 'Slave Hunters, Brothel Busters, and Feminist Interventions: Investigative journalists as anti-sex-trafficking humanitarians', *Feminist Formations*, vol. 24, issue 2, 2012, pp. 1—24.

vested interest in supporting stories of suffering that fit the perspective of funders or 'success stories' to prove that their actions work. Just as 'hit and run' operations by journalists and filmmakers, these types of stories often make it to the screen easily, because of their well-structured narrative dramas, easily identifiable conflicts and visible 'perpetrators' and 'victims'. Secondly, one must question what kind of social reality and access to the migrant women is possible, when for instance, as is seen in one of the most screened journalistic documentaries on human trafficking in Benin City produced by the TV channel Al Jazeera, the journalist is embedded with local security forces and arrives in the villages with policemen, not to rescue victims but to protect the journalist, while she interviewed a group of women.<sup>23</sup> All the above considerations and decisions in the process of filming illustrate the dilemmas involved when balancing representations, ethics and research with the everyday challenges of filming and the politics of filmmaking.

## The Use of Film in Anti-Trafficking Interventions

On 28 January 2014 I was invited to attend the premiere of the film *Life after Trafficking* at the Danish Film Institute's cinema in Copenhagen. The main Danish actors in the anti-trafficking community (primarily abolitionists but also a few non-abolitionists) were there, including NGO staff, government officials, IOM staff and researchers like myself.

The opening sequence of the film is shot from a car driving through one of the inner highways in what appears to be a large European city. We see dark-skinned women in shiny lingerie standing along a tree-lined avenue. The music is melancholic. One hour later the film's closing shot is of the film's protagonist Joy, who previously sold sex on European streets and in Denmark, but was returned to Nigeria and now sits behind a sewing machine, laughing with her three children. She also has an apprentice in her small newly painted tailor shop in Benin City.

Between the opening scene of lingerie and the end scene of sewing machines we follow Joy, who was deported from Denmark in 2006. Joy appears as an entrepreneurial woman, painting her shop, with ideas for business expansions and thinking how to name her business. In the

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<sup>23</sup> Al Jazeera 'The Nigerian Connection: An investigation into the plight of African women caught in a web of organised crime, prostitution and trafficking', 2013.

film, we meet her in her everyday struggles and successes with three small children, trying to run a small business in Benin City among armed robbers, her mother's financial expectations, and overwhelming everyday problems in contemporary Nigeria. Though no one at the premiere claimed that reintegration of former and now returned migrant sex workers is easy, the film depicted a so-called success story of an entrepreneurial woman, who, against all odds, manages to improve her life upon return. As we see the film perfectly followed point three in Svati Shah's critique of the 'anti-prostitution subgenre of documentary films'. *Life after Trafficking* has a narrative arc that begins by articulating sex work as violence and ends with scenes of rescue and sewing machines back in Nigeria.

In the discussion following the film, a Danish social worker, who works with Nigerian women being returned from Denmark, acknowledged the filmmakers: 'Thank you so much for this film. What I see in the film is a woman, Joy, who gets her dignity back in Nigeria. When that happens we (as social workers and IOM) have done a good job...we offer them [the Nigerian returned victims of trafficking] a helping hand.' As the Q&A after the film came to an end, a member of the audience asked the social workers and IOM employees sitting on the panel: 'I am wondering if anyone works against you in your return and reintegration efforts [to Nigeria]?' The same social worker replied immediately: 'Definitely, the women are the ones resisting the most. They do not see return as an alternative.'

While it is easy to dismiss the film and the replies from the social workers as simplistic and reductive analyses of the complexities of migration, the event rather illustrated how the films and representations of human trafficking are situated at the juxtaposition of migration control and humanitarian desires to rescue women from sex work and trafficking. In anti-immigrant climates—such as the current situation in Denmark— asylum advocates and anti-trafficking institutions believe that the best way to draw attention to their work is to represent the migrant's situation through the lens of gender-based discrimination and violence, and discourses on 'trafficking violence' in the migrant's home country. This is understandable, from their point of view, as Denmark has granted asylum to Nigerian women only in very few cases, and their cases had been, with the assistance of NGOs, prominently displayed in national media. Therefore, Nigeria is constructed as an unsafe 'home' for the women to return to. Yet, as this event illustrates, because so few are granted asylum and therefore are forced to go back to Nigeria for re-integration, anti-

trafficking social workers have to simultaneously construct ‘home’ and Benin City as a place of safety and opportunity, due to the Danish official policy of trying to increase the number of migrants accepting return.<sup>24</sup> Thus in a Danish context, Nigeria as ‘home’ and ‘home country’ comes to be constructed in opposing ways—simultaneously as safe and unsafe. Such competing notions of ‘home’ and ‘safety’ ultimately reveal the often clashing ambitions of migration control and anti-trafficking interventions.

From the surface, the advantages of representing human trafficking and sex work migration through simplistic suffering via images are bountiful: images generate publicity; images help people relate to a cause; images mobilise funds, etc.<sup>25</sup> All such advantages are well placed in anti-migration political climates and humanitarian environments that have experienced dramatic governmental budget cuts, making humanitarian movements increasingly dependent on private foundations and philanthropists for their campaigns and interventions. As such, simplistic images of human trafficking also have to be understood in the context of broader processes of the commercialisation of humanitarianism. Yet, while it might seem as well-intended and somewhat understandable that images are used to raise awareness and funding, this strategy of using films and crying victims of trafficking might prompt a backlash. Though not pointing specifically at trafficking films, Judith Butler<sup>26</sup> cautions more broadly against human rights campaigns that over-invest in testimonial truths (such as the trafficking testimonies often at play in ‘the anti-prostitution subgenre of documentary films’). The problem with such images of suffering is not merely that they present the women as victims; the problem is, as Susan Sontag argues in her famous essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*,<sup>27</sup> that viewing the suffering of the ‘other’ does not continue to produce compassion, neither does it change anything structurally. Sontag argues that the image alone cannot educate us to act, and she opposes the naïveté and innocence of those who continue to be shocked again and again by the images of atrocity (Sontag here as invoked in Judith Butler 2007).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Danish Government, *Action Plan to combat human trafficking 2011-2014*, Copenhagen, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> B B Golob, ‘Restricted Representation: The role of ethics and esthetics in framing images of suffering’, *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 12, issue 4, 2013, pp. 511—522.

<sup>26</sup> J Butler, ‘Torture and the Ethics of Photography’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and space*, vol. 25, issue 6, 2007, pp. 951—966.

<sup>27</sup> S Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin Books, London, 2004

<sup>28</sup> J Butler, 2007.

According to such arguments, the image of suffering ‘sex slaves’ on display in media, films and abolitionist anti-trafficking campaigns does not necessarily change the structures that produce trafficking; neither does it produce more compassion. Rather, reproducing these kinds of decontextualised images and sensational portrayals—as arguably happened with the Holocaust, the Vietnam War and hunger in Africa—produces compassion fatigue.<sup>29</sup> That is, over time we get so used to viewing images of suffering that our compassion numbs.

The dilemma is finding a balance between not forgetting or muting the suffering of others, while not reproducing or enlisting individual or sensationalistic stories as the basis for establishing an ethical or political response to suffering.<sup>30</sup> This balancing act tries to accommodate voices that are critical of the terms through which trafficking has been established as an object of knowledge and humanitarian concern, and which question the way in which trafficking campaigns subject migrant women to salacious interest and disempower them by portraying them only as victims.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, to critically examine the ethical implications of the mediated filmic image of the ‘trafficking victim’, we must consider not only the filmmakers’ aesthetic strategies but also how the mediated figure actually influences the humanitarian and political campaigns utilising these images.<sup>32</sup> While it might be considered ethically appropriate to reproduce images of suffering in some anti-trafficking campaigns in order to raise funds for anti-trafficking interventions, such interventions simultaneously appear unethical if the utilised images end up producing compassion fatigue.

Capturing the (ethnographic) complexity of this ‘truth’—whether in writing, film or other representations—is key to a production of representations that does not result in compassion fatigue and that can serve as counter-narrative to stereotypical representations of women and men who migrate to sell sex. The point here is not to pose ethnographic findings about sex work migration against filmic ones, nor against human rights campaigns; neither is it to argue that images of suffering should

<sup>29</sup> D Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason—A moral history of the present*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012; S D Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the media sell disease, famine, war, and death*, Routledge, New York, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> W S Hesford, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> R Andrijasevic, 2007; J Arthurs, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



not be on display. Rather, the point is—as Shah argues—that sex work, and sex work-related migration cannot be reduced to unitary or fixed ideas about suffering, slavery or prostitution-as-violence. We have to continue exploring how it is possible to represent abuse, exploitation, or other violations without relying on films that, as Shah points out, have a narrative arc that begins solely by articulating sex work as violence and ends with scenes of rescue or films that continuously conflate sex work with violence and/or trafficking. Simultaneously, we also have to consider the consequences of not showing simplified images of suffering within the field of human trafficking. What are the consequences of showing *Becky's Journey*, and listening to how she knowingly planned to enter the sex industry, for the funding of anti-trafficking campaigns? What are the consequences of screening the film in anti-immigrant political climates? Can funds be raised and interventions morally legitimised in the face of Becky's more complex narrative?

## Conclusion

Films on sex work migration and human trafficking could show how policies impact on, and have real consequences in migrants' lives. Instead we often see continuously reproduced simplistic images and narratives of human trafficking. To circumvent this situation and produce counter-narratives an argument of this article is that films on these issues should attend to more 'open-ended' narratives igniting continuous scrutiny of the political economy that sustains sex work migration and human trafficking. First and foremost, I suggest trying to identify how stories worth telling do not always depend upon simplistic stories and/or images of suffering; rather, the stories worth telling often lie in the complexity and not in readily available sensational simplicity. Utilising this approach, I see multiple benefits in combining ethnographic longitudinal research with filmmaking within the field of sex work migration and human trafficking.

Scholarly critiques of films on sex work migration and human trafficking are often well-placed. Simultaneously, however, scholars working within this field also have to let go of *a priori* prejudices towards films and the tools of filmmaking. Films cannot represent all facets of any research, nor the entire complexity of sex work migration—at times it is necessary to simplify the complexity of the field to tell a story at all. One argument is therefore that since films are produced in the context of multiple challenges

they are often the result of *the art of the possible*. No films are free of blind spots nor can they fully represent a group or a theme. Sometimes it is only possible to push the analysis or the images a little bit and then hope that over time multiple well-narrated films with complex messages reach broader audiences. To understand these processes scholarly and critical analyses have to explore not only how sex work migration and human trafficking are represented in film but also how the films were produced.

Films often carry a potential for (political) impact as they usually reach much wider audiences than academic papers. As such they also provide a space for voices within the sex worker rights movements and in migrant communities that might otherwise be muted. In order to fulfil this task, it is necessary for the filmmaker(s) to collaborate with the participants as well as become translators, mediators and interlocutors between localised and global contexts. Yet, while films have the potential to reform existing representations of human rights issues, there are no quick-fix solutions. Complex films on these issues often require a slow meditative approach to the documentary apparatus; it takes time and effort to get to know the subjects inside out, and above all to be able to observe them as thoughtfully as possible.<sup>33</sup> Within the field of sex work migration and human trafficking, documenting the complexities that exist entails venturing into a slow moving, collaborative, creative and reflective space.

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<sup>33</sup> L. Richardson, *I am Not Looking for Narratives. I am Looking for Life - Finding anthropology in contemporary documentary practice*, Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> J Metz (dir.), *Armadillo*, 100 min., Fridthjof Film, 2010.



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## ANTI-TRAFFICKING REVIEW

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# anti trafficking . review

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